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**THE TERRORISM NOVEL IN A  
SURREALIST MODE**

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PhD

2018



# **THE TERRORISM NOVEL IN A SURREALIST MODE**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements of the University of  
Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

Research undertaken in the Faculty of  
Arts, Design and Social Sciences  
Department of Humanities, English and  
Creative Writing

April 2018



## Abstract

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The Terrorism Novel in a Surrealist Mode is a practice-led research project comprising a novel (*The Science of a Single Cabbage*) and an accompanying reflective commentary. The research question to which my novel responds is: Can a surrealist writing mode help expand the terrain of the literary terrorism novel? I distinguish my surrealist “mode” from historical surrealism by identifying the movement as an unfinished project survived by a certain state of mind, while acknowledging the intellectual debt by noting five central preoccupations that are common to surrealism and my project: 1) the interplay of dream-life and conscious experience; 2) playful black humour; 3) anti-fascism; 4) engagement with spectacular crime; and 5) exploitation of paranoia as both a subject and a tool for querying reality as a social and psychological construct. My thesis argues that a surrealist mode can expose and unsettle the implicit givens of what can be termed a terrorism/national security ontology, thereby contesting the assumptions that circumscribe the permissible in our age. By employing this literary mode, *The Science of a Single Cabbage* contributes to a disruption of terrorism narrative through a destabilising interrogation of the boundaries between the real and the unreal.



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## Acknowledgements

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My undertaking of this endeavour would have been highly improbable without the support of the Research Studentship generously offered by Northumbria University and the Creative Writing department. I am profoundly grateful to my advisors, Andrew Crumey and Michael Green, for their thoughtful feedback and uncompromising criticism. As primary advisor, Andrew was particularly closely involved with the creative process and often seemed to understand my writing style better than I did, which was indispensable to me in finding the right register for the novel. I am indebted to Michael for waving all the right red flags whenever my commentary ventured too far away from its mission into foreign disciplinary territory. They both kept me from disappearing into my own tangents.

I would like to thank committee members Mark Blythe and Tony Williams, as well as former member Laura Fish, for their observations, questions, and challenges – and not least for their encouragement. Each of them consistently made me view my own work from perspectives I had not yet considered, certainly enriching the process as well as, hopefully, the end result.

I would also like to thank Steve Chambers for canny advice on how stories work, the handling of peculiar characters, and the useful alchemy of turning outrage into laughs. I must include as well Jonathan Lethem for his generosity in taking the time for a private conversation via Skype in the summer of 2015, which reinforced my belief in the utility of a surrealist literary mode in honouring the full richness of the real.

This section would not be complete without acknowledging the more personal contributions of my family: my parents, for probably the usual reasons but also for being so different from each other that I eventually absorbed the idea that

contesting narratives and considering contrasting viewpoints are projects that can be undertaken with love and respect; my children, Oscar and Maisie, for their invaluable assistance in maintaining in our home the high standard of ambient silliness that is so conducive to writing absurdly; and most of all to my wife Abby, because she'll never say she likes something when it isn't good enough, but when it is, she'll get properly excited. Also – and she may not realise this – I have known for some time that she is in fact the mysterious Coffee Lady who brings a hot, enabling cup of NYC Mud to me in bed every morning.

## **Declaration**

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I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas, and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this commentary has been approved. Approval has been sought and was granted by the University Ethics Committee on July 16, 2015.

I declare that the word count of the novel is 72,351, and that of the accompanying commentary is 32,369, exclusive of references, for a thesis total of 104,720 words.

Name: John Schoneboom

Signature:

Date: April 12, 2018





Part 1:  
The Science of a Single Cabbage

*The Novel*



## Chapter One

Squish.

Bodhamari Arbop stepped on another slug on his way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. A slug: the kind you're supposed to find outside, eating cabbage, not on a kitchen floor, in a flat, in a city. But here they were. Regularly. Fact of life.

Should be an improbable thing, Arbop thought as he surveyed the damage, a slug in a kitchen. It seemed improbable each time, with every new squish. The persistence of the improbable as routine was exactly what made it so maddening.

Obviously he kept an eye out for them so as to avoid just this sort of situation. Arbop habitually employed a special radar-toed skim-step on his dark sojourns in the wee hours. His eyesight was not the keenest but he could often sense the presence of a small moist intruder and negotiate around or lightly over it. Ideally he would only notice it a little. Then he could pretend he hadn't seen it at all, which could justify in all somnolence the act of doing nothing about it.

Otherwise, if he noticed it too much, he'd have to remove it. Removing a slug from an urban kitchen was not only a distasteful job, it also woke a fellow up when he's trying to stay sleepy. By the time you'd located the stiff paper to slide under the creature, gotten him on there, gone out into the back yard, and sailed him over the fence, your delirious ties to the kingdom of Hypnos would have largely been severed. Nor is that the end of it. If you've squished one, there's your foot to tend to.

Arbop duly performed the slug-ejection ritual and began the personal cleaning process. It is much harder than it ought to be to get slug slime off of a foot. Slug slime vanishes off the floor with the airiest brush of the flimsiest tissue. Yet a



foot needs to be scrubbed assiduously with soap and water for a surprising length of time. This is less of a mystery than it might first appear.

On the floor what you see is merely the shimmering gossamer trail gently laid down in a slug's wake by beautiful faerie historians with tiny buckets and ladles, lovingly recording the movements of the Pulmonata. It bears only an incidental relationship, if any, to what comes out when you crush one. They are two entirely different kinds of slime.

Arbop went back to bed and finally fell asleep about twenty minutes before it was time to get up, and then it was time to go to work. The slug episode of the night before had only been a tangent, and already it had become almost indistinguishable from his dreams.

Light rail journeys made him drowsy at the best of times. Sleep-deprived, Arbop felt on the train as if he were a gauzy image of himself superimposed on a cinematic projection. His ears and languid eyes, fixed and indeterminate in polite avoidance of his fellow passengers, took in many supplicants at once: Advertisements, public service announcements, conversations, a blurry landscape of images. Text could be ignored, but subtext was still operative. Culture, coercion, cohesion. The brute subtlety of sheer unnoticeable ubiquity. Arbop idly observed out of the window another train racing along in parallel to his own. Something was wrong here and it wanted to be recognised.

This parallel track was far enough away at a hundred metres for the unfocused eye to accept it as an Other. But it didn't belong there and it couldn't get away with its cozenage forever. It gave itself away when it suddenly jumped all at once radically closer and then instantly retreated. It was not a real train but a reflection of Arbop's on the glassy luxury high-rises just yonder. And that silhouette

inside the phantom train, the one Arbop had unconsciously been staring at, the one who seemed to stare back? Yes. None other than Arbop himself. A ghostly Arbop having the same exact moment in mimicry out there in the dozy land of shadows and mirrors.

Arbop made it to work without further incident. He was an officer of the Civilian Perimeter Patrol, and it was time to shake off the irrational and the irresponsible and get down to CPP business: protecting the city from those who would breach its perimeter.

Arbop's job — and it was a paid position, despite any connotations of cheap voluntarism associated with the word civilian — was to scout his sector of the outskirts. He didn't march around with a gun and a flashlight or binoculars or a telescope mounted on a cannon, that wasn't the idea. The idea was to blend in, to be unobtrusive, as if he were no more than an ordinary flâneur. He was to become an inconspicuous combination of a litter bin and corporate wall art and a man reading a newspaper and some weeds growing out of the cracks in the pavement, the wind itself and all that it moved. Most days nothing happened but the possibility of somebody trying to breach was ever present. The situation created tensions that occasionally gave him bad dreams, the sort that permeated the edges of one's conscious life, dreams featuring termites, toilets *en plein air*, collapse.

Nothing you couldn't live with. Arbop patrolled his sector, a six-hour shift, sitting on benches, pretending to smoke, offering his custom to the local baristas and makers of bacon, egg, and cheese sandwiches just like anyone else, and then reported back to headquarters to file his daily brief.

His colleague G stood at the reporting counter, beneath a placard whose purpose was to sustain inspiration:

*The bubble, our Perimeter,*

*Sacrosanct and real.*

*We shall protect its contours, that's the deal.*

*This is who we are.*

*This is how we feel.*

*And should that bubble rupture it will seal.*

They made some small talk. Arbop even told him about the slug, eliciting a smile from G and a story about snails.

“Listen,” said G. “I saw a video about this. Snails make slime for three reasons, OK? Two of them I don’t know. The third one? Pleasure. That one I remember.”

A sudden shift in the background brought a swift end to the chit-chat. A no-nonsense man back there who had previously been virtually invisible as a result of perfectly blending in had revealed his presence by moving. His function, like his name, was unknown, but he had an air of authority that strangled inessential questions and comments in their cribs. Arbop and G both assumed that this fellow was the boss. Arbop had decided that if he had to name the man, he’d name him Grimsby.

“What have you got for me?” said G abruptly, in his most businesslike tone of voice.

Arbop reported that he had seen no sign of breaching, but he had discovered a dead body and had called the people responsible for dealing with that. He dared to note that these dead bodies were becoming somewhat routine, and then he hesitated; something was bothering him.

“Begging Grimsby’s pardon here,” he said to G, low and reckless, with a feeling akin to flying in a dream, “but I keep reporting bodies and nothing ever happens.”

G said not to worry, all these cases were invariably solved.

“But investigated?” asked Arbop, eliciting a frown from G.

They both silently understood that this was a digression and not the main narrative. Dead bodies were one thing. Their interest was in the perimeter. Who has time for a murder mystery these days?

## CHAPTER TWO

When Arbop got home from work, his guard Yaro handed him another letter from his brother Oliver. She had dark brown hair of the sort he particularly liked, and routinely insulted him with a casual and petty vehemence that was not entirely unattractive.

“That’s four this week,” said Yaro as she handed the envelope to Arbop after giving him the suspicious once-over. “His usual bullshit.”

“So, is there a rule against it?” snapped Arbop.

“There ought to be,” said Yaro.

Oliver’s letters were thrilling. Reading them felt like having the spotlight of roaring madness shining hot right on you. It made one’s blood pound with virile shame.

“I don’t write them,” said Arbop, meaning that it wasn’t his fault. “He’s my own brother.”

“Yeah, I know,” replied Yaro, as if to imply that knowing meant not caring.

Arbop looked at Yaro for slightly too long, daring to imagine her throwing a live body out of a helicopter. Just as she sensed the awkwardness he nodded goodbye and went inside to open the letter. It was like the others.

Dear my brother Bodhamari whom I love,

There is a girl in the guest room, serving with a lack of prejudice, not alienated or employing theatrical metalanguage. She is an unhappy intellectual. If she is banal or vulgar, she is never ridiculous. I too grow weary of apocalyptic visions and post-nuclear pathos. We will die slowly. Like goldfish. I once had an Armenian cheese critic by my side, his head on my lap, a surplus of raw abundance; he had fallen asleep while urging me to destroy the machines of permitted consumption. Unconscious history and pseudo-narrative impress upon us a symmetry of simple particles, eclipsing anti-matter *ab nihilo* as a world-effect, neither growing nor diminishing. Instinctive. Criminal. Subversive. Yes. The radical meaning of potent illusions,

atrocious acts, affinities in isolated country chateaus, Magritte having mounted Sade, equivocating and didactic with pleasure. Hatred. Hypertrophy. Virulence. She watches me, the girl, and I sense *Entfremdung*. I welcome it.

Unavoidably,  
Your Oliver

Arbop saw Yaro squinting at him through the open window and felt embarrassed. She didn't even avert her eyes and pretend she hadn't been looking. She just kept right on squinting through the window like it was one hundred percent acceptable. This was a bit much. Arbop went straight up to the window and gave voice to his feelings.

"A man can read his own mail," he said, and he put a certain edge on his delivery.

"Who says he can't?" Yaro shot back.

"I wouldn't mind a little privacy in my own home."

"What a shame!" said Yaro with an expression that was both at his expense and for his benefit.

*Stupid guard.*

*And: Perhaps I'm being too hard on her.*

Arbop's brother Oliver no longer lived in the city. He had, in a sense, breached the perimeter, albeit before all the rules had been settled. Oliver was officially considered a person of interest, disreputable and worthy of any suspicions one might wish to cast his way.

Arbop and his brother had gone a long time without being in touch after the war, but then one day the first of these letters had come. Arbop wanted to write back but struggled to find the requisite enthusiasm. Instead of writing back he reflected on how "enthusiasm" was such an extravagantly crazy word. Compare it to what it

could have been: “enthusement”. That would have been a straightforward rendering of the state of being enthused, but no, instead of that staid final syllable, the word suddenly whips its tail ornately. Enthusiasm! Fancy! An ecstatic spasm of keenness. An enthusigasm. The letters, unanswered, still came regularly, just like this one today. His brother must be unhinged.

An unhinged brother is a brother with needs, or so whispered Arbop’s sense of familial responsibility. They were alone in the world, the two of them, their parents gone many years now, since the war. While still overseas, the last letter he had received from his mother had said “I’m dying of worry!” He had returned from his tour, he and Oliver both, to find that not only his mother had died but his father as well. They felt keenly the implicit rebuke. *Bitches!*

Just because things have gone on a certain way for a long time doesn’t mean they can’t change, and sometimes the change is as unpredictable and random as a sudden impulse at a tipping point. This was the day Arbop changed the pattern of not writing back to his brother. With barely a thought for what it might look like to a biased observer, Arbop now decided to pen some words of understanding that sought common ground.

Dear Oliver,

So! You’ve met a girl! That’s wonderful. I’m sorry I’ve been remiss about writing back, but I won’t befoul our communion with the torture of excuses. One either writes back or one doesn’t. You know perfectly well that we are brothers in every sense of the word. You could have stopped writing to me and I would never have blamed you. It strikes me that one takes responsibility. In any case I hope to meet this young lady some fine day, as hard as it is to picture. It sounds to me like you have a lot on your mind and for my money that’s all good, it means you’re not wasting your time on frivolities. I commend you with my fullest endorsement while certainly not condoning anything loathsome or dubious. As for me, nothing terribly fascinating, I keep an eye on the perimeter, I have my hobby, it wouldn’t interest you. There have been quite a few murders and I

doubt they're being properly investigated. How's that for interesting?  
I hope I have not bored you.

I remain your brother,  
Bodhamari Arbop

He opened his front door a crack and started to hand the letter to Yaro.

"Writing back?" said Yaro with the curled smile of someone posing as a butcher; real butchers don't smile like that, they're all business, like they're daring you to use the word disgusting.

"You can see well enough!" said Arbop.

They were ordinary coloured wooden blocks, the kind that many a toddler has stacked and knocked down. What made Arbop different was the authenticity of his reproduction, his grown-up glue, his whittling, and the tiny ink details he added with the patience of the moon: every window, every door frame, every recess, arch, and gargoyle faithfully reproduced on brightly painted surfaces.

He took the letter back and shut the door again. He stood there by the door, looking at the letter for a sombre length of time and tore it up. The letter was unsuitable. Arbop decided to continue the thing to which he had been most looking forward: advancing the tiny city of colourful blocks.

Arbop planned to content himself with a few of his favourite neighbourhoods rather than the entire urban landscape, but he'd do them in detail, right there in his front room; he was prepared to dedicate most of the floor space to the project. He held the whole city out as a possibility but did not want to commit himself to it, even inside the safety of his own head. Promises were sacred, and never more so than when they were done secretly to oneself.

The job that awaited him was putting the finishing touches on the monument at the centre of Circle Square. It was the tallest thing in town, a giant column



supporting the iron bust of no general, no philanthropist, no honoured dead, nothing but the idea of monumental columns. A simple concrete block rested on top of the thing, a monument to concreteness, to realism. The real monument in town had a famous defect: it had been built slightly off centre relative to its base. At the time of its construction there had been lawyers, labour actions, and recriminations. But many years had passed and inexcusable flaws had become beloved quirks. He would build it as it was, not according to an untrustworthy authoritarian view of what it should have been.

Arbop stood up before it, shook out his arms and his legs, swivelled his hips around, and slowly peeled off all of his clothes one piece at a time, consciously inhaling liberation and exhaling fleeting moments as each layer of clothing got tossed across the room with sensual abandon. He would work on the city in the nude. Why not? He did it frequently enough. He had of course pulled the shades down, assiduously avoiding any eye contact with that Yaro. He took his socks off first to ensure that no matter what else happened, he could never be found nude but for socks. *Revel*, thought Arbop. *Revel!*

Now he felt that all barriers between himself and his creation were gone. He was at one with his project. True, if his wife came home suddenly there would be some explaining to do. That possibility was, for better or worse, unlikely. She had been gone for weeks and her most recent text messages indicated she was still solidly out and about. If she did walk in unannounced and some explaining was needed, why then he'd simply face up to it and do the explaining. It wasn't so terribly embarrassing. Why should it be? He was an artist: an artist in the raw. Of course, it wasn't just the nudity he'd have to explain, but the project itself. It took up much of the floor and was growing. Then there were his little charges, the spiders

that looked on from their perches around the window. All of this she would be adamantly against. But then there was a knock at the glass.

“Hey! Arbop!” yelled Yaro, trying to peer in. “What are you doing in there?”

“I’m busy!” yelled Arbop. “I’m having some personal time!”

She let him off with some grumbling, allowing Arbop the time to put the last few light grey strokes on the pillar’s crowning block. Circle Square was looking good. That whole neighbourhood was really shaping up.

Was that something moving inside the Civic Centre? Arbop squinted mightily. One of the spiders? Perhaps soon there would be spiderlings crawling all over, in, and around his little city. How glorious. How glorious, if only his wife could be persuaded in the event of her return.

But just as suddenly the little fellow was gone. He had been there? Surely. They must move quickly indeed, very very quickly indeed. They must move instantaneously, like ideas, there was no other explanation and, when faced with facts, one has no choice but to accept them, or to defeat them with context, interpretation, or counter-information, or else simply to welcome insanity. Arbop stood naked and marvelled at the miracles of everyday life until the unwanted sound of a knock on his door shattered the moment.

He stood in a pensive stance, hands raised as if ready to ward off ghostly vapours, and cautiously moved to the door without opening it.

“Yes?” he said, allowing himself to sound as annoyed as he felt.

“It’s Esther,” said Yaro.

“It’s me!” said Esther.

It was Esther. What she wanted was for Arbop to bake her a cake, supposedly for her grandson's birthday party. Negotiations about the type of cake and the colour of the icing were made through the closed door.

"How come you're not opening the door?" asked Esther.

"Me?"

"Who else? What's the matter?"

"Nothing!"

"Why so defensive?" shouted Yaro.

"What are you," said Esther, "naked or something?"

"What?"

"He heard you," said Yaro.

"Are you naked?" Esther repeated.

Another sigh.

"He's naked all right," said Yaro.

"I knew it," said Esther.

"He spends a lot of nude time in there," whispered Yaro.

"Don't bake it naked," shouted Esther. "I don't want no pubic hairs in it."

Arbop dropped his head wearily. He and Esther had developed a cake-based relationship that occasionally included a cup of tea or a drop of sherry. Of the two of them, Arbop was the one who baked the cakes.

The mood for sensually inhabiting the act of creating a simulated tiny city had been ruined for this day, so Arbop trudged around recovering the clothes he had so freely flung about the room. He paused when he got to his underpants. Put them back on? Change them for new ones? It had been two days. Back on, but change

them tomorrow. It was when he was pulling his socks on that he noticed that his toe was gone.

He imagined that he heard one of the spiders laughing and looked up in alarm before realising that it was a mad thing to think. There was no conceivable reason for the spiders to find it amusing.

It was the middle toe on his left foot, which struck him as strange. How could one lose a toe in the middle? It was relatively easy to imagine one getting knocked off on either side, but from the well-protected middle? And its neighbours unscathed? What was left was just a smooth patch of skin, no scarring, as if the toe had never been there. Had it? Had he only now just noticed that where others had five he had always had four?

It could certainly be worse. He could have lost the nose right off his face like Major Kovalyov; his own situation was infinitely preferable. Arbop counted his blessings. Perhaps his toe would turn up in somebody's pie, or in a stolen greatcoat, smoking a cigar.

Could he have lost it in the war and suffered a mental trauma that prevented him from recognising it? Only he put his socks on every day, and didn't he just clip his toenails four days ago? Perhaps it wasn't gone at all, except that counting proved otherwise. Still, there's more to reality than math.

It was confusing and infuriating, but it did not appear to be getting any worse. It was stable. It wasn't bleeding. It didn't hurt. Arbop tried to convince himself that he didn't really need to go to the doctor, tried to un-notice the missing toe to the extent that he could forget all about it and do nothing. Alarming medical issues, generally speaking, are best left completely ignored for as long as possible. But then when he glanced down again, another toe was also gone. It was the toe

right next to where his middle missing toe should have been, on the little toe side, making for quite a big gap between remaining toes. This would require some getting used to, some rebalancing and adjusting. But the disturbing thing was that this time, Arbop thought he saw the tail end of a toe-like object scarpering away in his peripheral vision and disappear into the dark recesses at the entrance of his tiny Civic Centre. He knew of course that he had imagined it, as he well might be imagining that his toes were missing. Or that any of them were still there.

For the first time he looked at the spiders in his front window not with affection, but with suspicion. Were they involved in this? Arbop could almost imagine a scenario in which the spiders wound webbing tightly around a toe, cutting off the blood supply and ultimately causing it simply to pop off. The means were plausible enough. Motivation: Malice? Opportunity: Inattentive moments?

Arbop grabbed a small flashlight and shone it into the Civic Centre. It was dark inside there, and deep, and there was no angle where the light could illuminate its insides entirely. If he really wanted to examine it he'd have to unbuild that whole street and, given how mad the whole idea was, he really didn't want to do that. He imagined that he could hear music coming faintly out of the blackness, but it could have been coming from anywhere. Perhaps it was Esther next door, but she had never listened to Brazilian-influenced electronic microtonal dodecaphony before. It was normally Gene Krupa. He softened perceptibly with regard to his spiders, taking a moment to think fondly about how frail they were, how patient.

Arbop did like his doctor very much, and he had been meaning to head into the real city centre in order to make some sketches for the further development of his tiny false city. All right. He would go. Put a few things in a bag. Leave the house. His front door had expanded and wedged itself against the frame, as it

sometimes did, necessitating a struggle. It had something to do with moisture, or heat, or happenstance. He pulled on it and wiggled it and grunted heavily at it. Finally he got it open with a moderate growl of frustration.

“Hang on,” said Yaro as Arbop made his exit. “Where are you off to?”

“Doctor,” said Arbop. “*Inter alia*.”

“What kind of doctor?”

She managed to imply something lurid with the question.

“It’s a private medical matter.”

“Easy, Mister Tersefellow. I’m making conversation here. Why is everything all hatred with you?”

“I’m sorry. I’m worried about my spiders. They’re acting strangely and I, well I just hope they’re all right.”

“That is so sweet. Most people would just squash them.”

“I know. Also I’m having a problem with my foot.”

“Your foot eh?”

“Yes. Some of my toes are missing. It’s nothing. I thought I should get it checked, that’s all.”

“Let me see!”

Yaro persuaded him to allow it and she checked him out, gave a low whistle.

“That’s pretty disgusting,” she said, handing him a city travel permit.

Arbop laughed. She was right, it was disgusting! He loved going into the city and would do so even for no reason. Now he had reasons and a head swimming with imagination. In he went, only half delirious with spiders, recesses, toes, and all sorts.

## CHAPTER THREE

“I must be able to face him without being afraid.”

Arbop sat on the train and repeated it: Face him without being afraid. Face him without being afraid. After all, what would he do if he were forced to confront a real breacher? There was little point in presuming it would be a kindly inadvertent fool of a breacher. It could be a real devil. Someone with a brain so twisted with bad thoughts that he might not even think of other people as real. There was little point hoping he'd be tiny, either. The thing to do was to prepare oneself to face a gigantic, rage-fuelled madman. How to make such preparations? Arbop practiced everywhere, especially on trains. He would pick out the most fearsome person on the subway car, and imagine facing him — or her — until he could do it without fear. If he could do that, he didn't care what else came next. He would have the serenity to do quite spontaneously whatever might be required.

Some people seemed able to bound about, staring anyone in the eye and owning every interaction, natural born pirate types. Arbop, by contrast, was not a naturally fearless person, so he needed this practice if he were to have any hope of protecting the perimeter in the event action were actually required. Trying to ignore any feelings of vulnerability caused, for example, by the space where his toes had been, Arbop soon found his man. Sitting across and to the left, knees wide, taking up a defiant amount of space, expression devoid of all nonsense, there he was. He had the bulky torso, the body language that suggested he'd go off at the next thing that irritated him in the slightest. He even wore an eye patch, making for one less eye to look into, and seemed like the sort of man who abstained from agriculture and disregarded Zeus. Arbop was afraid to look at him without fear. It could easily lead to actual hostilities and that was not the idea. The idea was to be a capable keeper of

the peace, not a rogue instigator of character-testing violence. The trick was not, therefore, to look aggressively into however many eyes a man had, but to look next to his head and imagine doing it. But as the train drew near to his stop, Arbop dared to look straight at the unpatched eye.

The man felt it and looked back with a Cyclopean probe. Arbop looked away. Afraid. Failure. Two breaths. Looked back again. Again the man turned to meet his gaze, and this time Arbop widened his eyes and attempted a penetrating look of savage serenity. They were practically at his stop and Arbop knew those doors would open and he'd soon be out. He imagined that his eyes were emitting beams of pure sunlight, entering his opponent and making him wince from its power, creating hesitation within him, shrinking the overmatched fellow's overall spiritual feeling. From the other man's perspective, Arbop looked like a black and white ham from an old silent film. The man wished he had a placard to hold up with curly lines around the edges and some dialogue on it: "Oy! Have you got a problem?" The pirate Polyphemous looked away smiling at the thought with a self-evident absence of fear. The doors opened and Arbop was out, feeling less than satisfied but glad for the experience.

Like so many social services, the walk-in clinic was located at the Civic Centre, a short walk from the subway stop. Arbop had to wait for a long time in a room full of chairs, listening to the detestable sounds that sick people make. Fortunately Arbop had thought to bring two books, one fiction, one non-fiction, so he could play the game where he alternated between the two of them and got them mashed up in his mind. He found that in this way he could create the raw subconscious material from which truly interesting dreams could arise, and he could wake up ready to believe in the possibility or impossibility of anything.



Finally he did see a woman who he had no reason not to believe was his usual doctor, Dr Bronofsky. She looked not only at his missing toe space, but at both his feet, and with a comforting sense of iatric scrutiny.

“Let me ask you a question,” she said, managing to sound kind.

“Fine.”

“Would you say you were under any unusual stress lately?”

“Unusual stress?”

“Yes, you know, pressures or deadlines at work? Family troubles, that sort of thing?”

“No no, nothing unusual.”

“Anything you might be pushing below the surface?”

“You think my toes are in my head?”

“I can have a look.”

Arbop smiled and so did Dr Bronofsky. She had a fine nose right in the middle of her face. All the never-in-a-million years between them didn’t stop Arbop from imagining himself boldly staring anyone down who might try to harm her. If only somebody would attack her. In his mind, as he sat, he was in mid-leap and aiming for the criminal knee. He would accept no reward. Unthinkable.

“It definitely isn’t congenital,” offered Arbop. “I had all my toes only a short time ago.”

“And you’re certain of it?”

“Quite certain.”

“It’s easy not to notice things that aren’t there.”

“A fair point, yet far from always true.”

Dr Bronofsky took a moment to appear thoughtful.

“I’ll tell you what I think. We don’t get all that much of it these days but the signs are clear enough. Radical apoptosis, internucleosomal DNA fragmentation, hypercatalysed macrophages with absorption into the phosphatidylserine. That is my professional opinion.”

“That has to be what it is.”

“Very probably self-limiting, I really wouldn’t worry. People generally don’t simply disappear inside themselves do they? Not physically. If you do notice any pain, of course don’t hesitate to use paracetamol. I could prescribe something stronger?”

“I’d rather not. I rely heavily on my senses. Maybe in my younger days!”

She did not laugh there, so Arbop regretted the little joke.

“I am still quite young, of course,” said Arbop, to more no laughter. He was thirty-two.

The appointment had run its course and parting pleasantries were exchanged. Arbop felt like he wanted to kiss the doctor on her shapely fragrant cheek but he hesitated and then couldn’t even shake her hand. So he gave her a stiff little wave of his hand from an awkward arm position. She smiled at him; he stood nodding and then without grace or ceremony simply turned and left.

Arbop felt much reassured by the visit. So he had lost a couple of toes due to a bit of self-limiting macrophageal mischief. A first-world problem! There were more important things with which to occupy his mind. One was work-life balance. Effie, Arbop’s wife, believed strongly in working to rule, that is, not going above and beyond, not going the extra mile, not giving a hundred and ten percent. Work-life balance demanded it. She actively chose so-called leisure activities — unremunerated life activities like thinking and dancing — as much on the stipulation

that they could in no way be useful to her professionally as on any inherent pleasure to be found therein. The pleasure, in other words, diminished in direct proportion to the professional utility of the pursuit. Nor did she hate her job. She was a steamfitter. It was fine and it had its place. Fortunately, it was relatively easy to fill her non-work time with activities that had no conceivable application to steamfitting except in the most generously holistic sense, in which all of one's qualities were always present in every moment, every action, in tiny resonances.

It was different for Arbop and his obsession with the urban lifestyle. A thoroughgoing interest in tiny simulacra naturally supports perimeter integrity operations. Arbop's intimate familiarity with the city's contours and routes, its ins and its outs, contributed mightily to his effectiveness as a CPP agent. It wasn't just a job to Arbop. It was devotion. It was *giri*. Did its all-consuming nature repel Effie and spin her into the perpetual errand from which she never returned, just as inexorably as it drew in all of Arbop's life energies? Undoubtedly, yet what could be more work-life balanced than a perfectly integrated spherical oneness of purpose?

Arbop had his sketch pad with him to make note of a few details on a few architraves and chimeras, gadroonings and cornices and the like. He found a good spot to sit just on the border between his sector and a gentrifying residential neighbourhood known as the Wallops. While he sketched he also wondered. Where would they come from, exactly, those who would breach, those barbarians for whom he waited? What of those who would leave their comforts in order to join them from within in an amassing of numbers? What means of ingress and egress would they choose? Arbop could hardly imagine them just walking over the horizon. The outskirts were well watched. The skies? Perhaps. But Arbop always imagined there

would be tunnels involved. He always attributed to the barbarian underground a subterranean quality.

There is the city one sees and the city one does not see. Tunnels abound. Passage-work. Trenches. Lairs. These were wholly absent, it occurred to Arbop, from his tiny colourful construction. What a flaw! Apart from the obvious paths of the underground transport system, what else was there? There would be more tunnels, less explored, known only by those few who needed to know, the cognoscenti. Neglected infrastructure, obsolete and abandoned. Water tunnels, missile bases, the ruins of asylum basements, bootlegger routes, valve chambers, bomb shelters, barrel vaults, bridge anchorages. Muscular and lonely places, built by machines, a past no longer even echoing, but if you went there and dropped a pebble or shouted like a child it would be thrilling. A hidden network. If Arbop were a barbarian he'd exploit it himself. If people expected barbarians to be stupid, Arbop bet, they'd only be setting themselves up as surprise victims whose last words would be "oh noooooooooo!" For his part, Arbop would judiciously presume them to be a canny lot of horse traders.

What did they want? The question was ultimately of little practical significance. It engendered only the most horrifying phantasmagoria concerning the medievalist violation of today's urban lifestyles. One didn't really want ever to find out. Maybe we'd never sleep again, like it wasn't hard enough already. It would probably involve torture, massacres, the unspeakable, the unbearable agonies of uncounted mothers. Whatever it was: no thank you!

Face them without fear. Nobody can think with their hair on fire. Without fear. Without fear.

The thought always came back. There was nothing to stop Arbop from jumping in a car, pointing it at the great beyond, and stepping on the gas. Freedom. He would only have to obtain a car, obviously, and renew his driver's license, which had lapsed, since nobody needs to drive in the city. Also, he'd need a good money supply or an enormous amount of not caring. And of course he'd just end up in some other city that was much the same only not as good and twice as lonely, or he could go for the small-town life and run a general store after the owner finally died. He could live off the land, off the grid, dig a well, burn firewood, raise spiders, kill food, grow stuff. So it could definitely be done. He'd be suspect, as a breacher, naturally, and probably end up on a list. Trackers'd probably come after him. Couldn't rule it out. Man ought to be tracked, having been privy to sensitive CPP methods and scarpering. Might have to make a last stand in a cabin with a rifle and spit a lot of tobacco juice. Make his own underwear out of coarse jute.

None of that mattered. The thought was always repelled. Idle nonsense, which only served to reinforce his convictions. Arbop didn't want to leave. Transgress his own perimeter? No. He wasn't some dirty breacher. He wouldn't walk away from the city he loved to go join the chaotic morass of madness beyond. *As, whispered the back of his mind, his brother had done.* He would disappear into neither errands nor spiders. So. What would it come to, then? What was the scenario? How would it all begin, when it finally came? Arbop sketched and drifted. A bonafide ten-thirty-three in CPP parlance: a full-on emergency situation.

A manhole cover might pop up. Middle of the night. Silence, otherwise. A pair of eyes would blink and some murmuring would escape. The cover would slide over with a heavy metallic scrape. It would happen with simultaneity all over the city, uptown, downtown, east side and west. Manholes popping up, slide-scraping.

Folks from beyond the perimeter penetrating, scrabbling, clambering, slithering, disappearing into new shadows, fornicating, infusing, prevaricating. Some of course staying beneath, just underneath us. Listening, scraping, clackity-clacking with their long insectivorous fingernails. Hard like Coleoptera. Drooling like the deranged victims of unconscionable experiments performed by respected Canadians paid with laundered money. They would become clerks and judges, bag our groceries and stamp our forms. Policemen. Legal secretaries. Salesmen. They'd set our fires and put them out. Insinuating, constantly insinuating themselves into our neighbourhoods. They'd ask us for cakes and favours, deliver our mail and dance on our laps from song to song until we didn't realise how much money we'd spent and we were bone dry.

They would quite naturally take advantage of the extensive underground network of large, high-pressure piping systems that carry water, steam, chemicals, and fuel throughout the city. They would have an understanding of what's hidden behind all the walls, in all the basements, all the things that made everything work but could not be seen, all the things that everyone took for granted and depended on, the things that had taken on the status of ontological givens. They would re-route and empty. They would retrofit and occupy. What was once an important release valve that kept the very streets from exploding upwards into busy intersections throwing tourists and traders hither and yon would become secure transport for secretive, sweaty men clad in leather and steel-toed boots who knew how to wriggle.

In order to accomplish it they would have to take over the steamfitters union. First they'd become apprentices, shadowing the journeymen. Shadowing, shadowing. They would be given knowledge and welding torches, special visors and gloves and hourly wages six times the minimum. They'd gain a practical

understanding of weight, pressure, temperature, and volume and apply the kinds of calculations that a mentally fat, pale, and unsuspecting population had largely forgotten about while still in high school. Triangles would be used to move round pipes from Point A to Point B without ever once requiring a constrictive right angle. What most of us derided as a bunch of Pythagorean bullshit they would learn was crucial and would apply in cunningly ruthless fashion.

One steamfitter would resist. She would have Persian brown eyes and no errands to run, nothing to do except face the obvious peril and defeat it with superior guile. Once she understood the danger, thanks to vital information provided by her loyal and vigilant husband, she would know exactly what needed to be done. She'd see what was going on and immediately compile the necessary blueprints. She would in one efficient montage sequence lay out, assemble, and install hydraulic and pneumatic components for cooling, heating, lubricating, and sprinkling the living hell out of the invading force using the latest in industrial production and processing technologies.

But just when it seemed like everything was going just a little too smoothly, something would go wrong. A rogue cell expected to be at Point A would unaccountably be at Point B and avoid the expected brand of steamfitter street justice. An ugly building that nobody liked would be taken down, causing a mixture of emotions among architecturally sensitive citizens, who would be forced to process conflicting reactions and generate rationalisations that would complicate their moral frameworks. The new luxury condominium skyscraper on Billionaire's Row for example, which looked like it was made of bathroom tiles from the 1970s, a thin cuboid that didn't know when to stop vertically and marred sight lines from every possible horizontal perspective. Neatly removed and nobody harmed. Psyches

and societies alike, fractured and squabbling, chasing chickens through the fox's mansion. It would be all hell, and it would have broken and gone all loose.

Sirens broke apart the reverie. Real sirens. Arbop decided it was time to head home. He walked past a playground where, by the swing set, a group of women were doing tai chi, by the handball court, couples danced to salsa music, on the basketball court the federation of all ethnicities battled for hoop supremacy, and, by the bandstand, the skateboard kids took turns trying stunts. In amongst them there were children, too, throwing water balloons and inventing games on climbing frames and laughing. Arbop stood, stared, smiled, and openly radiated joy, love of humanity and the universe, the power to stop any outbreak of ugliness with the merest look of total understanding. There were no such places in his childhood.

Arbop bought a taco from a man in a truck and remembered being in a car with both his parents when he was small. It was full of cigarette smoke, at the time one of his favourite smells, cigarette smoke with a window opened just enough to get the right mix of fresh air in. Father driving. Retinitis. Really should not have been driving, especially when he didn't already know the way. Mother, acting as navigator, in the passenger seat, Arbop and his brother in back. The question was which exit.

"This one?" asked Dad in a voice just tinged with anxiety.

"Just follow the signs that say south," said Mom.

"I can't read that. Do I turn here or go straight?"

"South! South!"

"Ummmm...."

A slow exchange at high speed.

"Straight!" yelled the young Arbop. "Just go straight!"



*He can't see, Mom. He can't read. Speak his language.*

By the time Arbop got home back in the present day officials were reporting that a statue of Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes was missing from Dada Park. The odd thing from Arbop's perspective was that when he checked his tiny personal version of the park to refresh his memory of it, the statue was also missing there. He could not be absolutely positive whether he had ever created one, but as he was trying to recall, he saw for certain a spider enter the Civic Centre. He stuck his nose in there and leaned in, seeming to hear music, leaned in closer and closer and closer. Finally he was pulled completely inside.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Arbop was in a tiny dark hallway in what appeared to be the lower level of the Civic Centre. It wasn't normally this dark, or this loud. His sternum was being rhythmically punched in an agreeable way by a combination of forces that had united into an inseparable whole: kick drum and bass, or their *doppelklingendesaches*, slammed focused waves of air into one big Arbop-shaped tympanic membrane. Meanwhile laser-thin fingers of Hindi melody directly tickled the parts of his brain responsible for floating.

He was suspended an indefinite distance above the ground by the power of it, perhaps only a few femtometres. The sound, the air, the vibration, the pulse, it was all certainly within as well as without him so he reckoned with a wry smile that it must be entering through his various personal tunnels and filling him up. Everything that could wobble in or on him was wobbling. He wasn't even in the room with the music yet, only in a wet hallway, so he pressed on ahead towards the visibly throbbing metal door. It was hard work because the air was thick and his legs were only imaginary.

When he finally arrived he didn't have to knock. A small narrow rectangle at eye level opened up and some dark brown eyes peered through. There was some ocular crinkling and he knew the person was smiling as the small peep-slit closed and the big door opened, letting out a crushing surge of sound wave that knocked Arbop back a few steps. Soon he was bobbing on the surface of it and felt in reasonable control. The person who opened the door was a Chinese woman with a bearing that suggested an elevated consciousness, a preoccupation with the sublime and the libidinal. Her eyes seemed both open and closed. The dance music in her

head was not a special occasion; it was always there, and she was always listening to it.

“Can I come in?” he asked. “Does it cost money?”

“A tenner,” she said.

“A tenner,” Arbop repeated tentatively.

“Fucking great party,” she said, shrugging her shoulders to question whether Arbop even deserved to be let in for a thousand tenners, and signifying that she couldn’t care less what he decided, yet simultaneously encouraging him to see the light. The swear word was jarring, coming from a face of such delicacy. The usage struck him as beautiful and he hoped she had never used the word previously and would never use it again, that it would represent a unique moment in time. He didn’t want to know anything else about her, ever.

Arbop produced a tenner and offered it with fingertips that didn’t even like to be soiled by money. *This filthy thing? Take it, it means nothing to me.*

The door opened. Arbop was pulled in by the undertow and absorbed into an undulating shrewdness of ecstasy. Only his own shy reserve kept him discrete and separate unto himself. Only his own sense of not belonging kept him from belonging, but it also gave everyone else a sense of his not belonging. What was this place? What was he doing here?

“Bodhamari!” came a voice he knew right away to be that of his own brother.

“My brother.”

They went with a hand clasp and one-armed hug combination, keeping hips at a discreet separation, for between two and three seconds.

Arbop instinctively played it cool when he felt like he was in over his head. He stood next to his brother and looked around the room nodding his head, like this was all something they had done every night for years. Oliver just beamed as if he were in on the joke.

“Don’t worry,” said Oliver.

“Me?” said Arbop, and Oliver laughed.

“I’m not here to violate your perimeter.”

Arbop made a forced attempt to laugh casually but then he thought he saw something across the dance floor.

“If you’ll excuse me a moment,” he said, and began to angle through the slippery density.

His expectation was that as he got closer, his suspicion would be falsified. On the contrary, the closer he got, the more it looked like Effie, until, awkwardly dancing right behind her, there could be no doubt. It was she. Such fine hands for a steamfitter. Such grace. He decided to continue dancing awkwardly with mixed feelings until she noticed him, which did not take long. She sensed his presence and turned to see who was there. When she saw him she smiled, whereas he flattened his mouth and raised an eyebrow in the accusative.

“My darling,” she said, running a sultry index finger from his forehead to the tip of his nose. “Where have you been?”

“Me?” he said, only dimly aware that it wasn’t the sort of response that should be used for too many questions in a row.

“I’ve been waiting for you for ages,” she said, not the least bit annoyed. “I was beginning to think you’d never turn up.”

“But it’s you with the endless errands. I come and go like the tides.”

“How funny you are.”

“But I’m serious!”

Arbop received a tap on his shoulder and turned his head to look. There stood Oliver covered in spiders, smiling broadly. He held his arms out and laughed as if to say look, I’m completely covered in spiders! Arbop for his part was never alarmed by spiders and he was glad that Oliver was taking it so calmly. Perhaps they could get along after all. But then on second look the spiders were gone; Oliver’s arms were by his sides and he appeared at peace. When Arbop gave him a look of great scrutiny, a look that tried to figure out the joke, Oliver screwed his face up and stuck his tongue out. It was what Harpo Marx used to call throwing aookie. They both laughed, and Effie as well.

Effie held Arbop’s hand and he began to relax and claim the party as his own. Any jokes that had been on him were now his jokes on anyone else, on the lot of them, on everyone, and it was entirely up to them to deal with it. To hell with them if they had a problem with heaven. This train of thought unfortunately gave his thin smile a cruel aspect all of a sudden, which he himself would have found disagreeable had he been able to see himself as others saw him.

“Ha ha!” laughed Oliver, startling Arbop.

He was pointing at two odd-looking gentlemen wearing threadbare coats of stretch cotton, twins apparently except the one of them just that much larger. They were carrying a large body-sized bag and seemed to regard the revellers with suspicion.

“Look at the pair of them,” twinkled Effie. “They’ve got no necks. Their coats look like old socks their heads have poked through!”

Oliver and Effie fell apart laughing. Arbop looked on with great interest but without the hilarity, because he didn't like making fun of people for their coats and toes were a sore subject with him. Yet it was all true. The men's prolate heads even had hard faces like visors, suggestive of keratin, and not even any features of which to speak. Naturally these impressions could well be mere pareidolia, like some burnt toast Madonna, a point not in the least bit lost on Arbop. The phalangeal pair huddled together with eyes narrowed and cornered, looking for all the world as if they didn't belong here and knew it full well. A third man came up and had a quick, quiet word with them, making them both seem to wiggle slightly, and then he was off. He too looked familiar. Had it been Grimsby? This wasn't the place he'd have chosen to imagine Grimsby but everyone would enjoy many more surprises if only they expected them more.

Arbop decided to approach them, find out who they had in the bag, and determine their relationship to the notional Grimsby. When he had gotten no closer than four metres from them, however, they panicked and began to waddle away. Arbop moved more quickly but was only able to grab an edge of their great black sack. They yelped and struggled to get away. Out of the sack slid a life-sized statue of an ancient dramatist. Arbop stood it up and when he looked around the men were gone. The statue appeared to be grateful.

Effie and Oliver were both gone now as well but the party itself was in full swing. There were even well-known local figures there, which seemed strange somehow at a party that felt so secret and illegal. It seemed like the authorities would frown on the whole spectacle and yet there were several prominent council members, laughing and behaving immaterially. There was the mayor, Strongman Simms, performing a terrible swirling dance wearing a cape.

“See Kennedy’s missing brain!” Simms was shouting. “JFK’s actual brain, missing in real life! So amazing you can’t make it up! Step right up, step right up and see the fabled actually missing brain of John F Kennedy!”

He stood at the head of the room waving his cape around a display pedestal on which rested a black metal box. People approached him all smiles and he would waves his arms around dramatically before raising the lid of the box and giving the customers a peek inside. Some saw an obliterated stub of a frontal lobe, some saw an outsized intact fifteen hundred gram beauty, some just saw what extruded and some matted hair, all went away happy. They ooh’d and ahh’d and clapped their hands, invariably going away smiling and satisfied.

So it was a night of anything goes. Arbop decided to start drinking. Or if not drinking then certainly he would have something to join in the Dionysian spirit of the event. Something, almost anything, but what? He would look around, try to find a bar or a distributor of interesting liquids, pills, or powders — it was obviously only a dream, after all, what’s the harm in it? — and while he was at it he would try to control reality. One doesn’t always get a lucid dream, one may as well take advantage.

Make everybody take their clothes off? Start a brawl? Invent a crime and order a random beheading? Any or all of these possibilities seemed likely enough without Arbop’s omnipotent intervention, and were banal besides, and in any case he found himself as constrained by morality without consequences as he was with them. Awake, asleep, he was who he was. He did not have it in him to go strutting around his own dreamscape acting like Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus. The realisation disappointed him at the same time it came as a relief.

But could he? Was it possible? Just to go against nature, *pour vivre à rebours*, he issued a shameful mental command to a certain woman, just the nearest one for convenience.

Nothing happened. She just looked at him and kept dancing. If she was concerned about the furrowed forehead and screwed-up eyebrows of Arbop as he tried sending mental beams at her, she didn't show it. Arbop frowned. Things were just as he had hoped, then. So be it. He decided to will his own clothes off, why not, and will them scattered to the winds. Then he opened a door and went reeling outside into an alleyway dressed like a soldier on a blindingly hot day.

*Come on, Birdie*, thought Arbop. *Come on out.*

It was wartime. Arbop, along with the rest of his unit, had always called the enemy Birdie so he wouldn't seem so frightening.

*Here, Birdie Birdie Birdie.*

The lucidity had left the dream. Arbop crept out of the alleyway and into a side street, only to creep down another alleyway. Windows everywhere. Doors. Manholes. Suddenly a clink of a stone hitting pavement. He wheeled around: nothing. Out of the dead air a shot rang out and he scrambled for cover by a big green plastic garbage bin, behind which Arbop felt stupid cowering. Fumbling for his gun, closing his nose flaps, his eyes darting around wildly, Arbop was mad to get off the defensive and take the fight back to Birdie, but there was nothing there.

Nothing but people. Regular people. Shopping in the market stalls, talking on cell phones, sitting in cafés. Arbop realised the shot had been one of his own guys, back by the vehicle. He had gone all itchy and lost it, taken a potshot, and now just crouched there chewing on his own teeth.



Arbop kept his back to the wall and inched his way along into the next narrow alleyway. There was a clink of silver on plates from somewhere, but muffled where it should have been sharp. It came from a restaurant maybe, or somebody's house, but there was no laughter, no conversation: a restaurant for the dead. He imagined that he heard the plastic pinging sound of a kicked ball, the cheap kind that ends up shrivelled by the end of summer, but it might have just been the clicking sound his ears made whenever he tightened his jaw.

The sun was loud it was so hot. Arbop saw only black shadows and blinding white concrete walls. He felt like he was flying, but without going anywhere, like he was made of some hyper-elastic material. His feet stayed rooted but the rest of him just stretched to infinity and waved around in the solar wind. Eventually however he snapped back to an ordinary size and shape and the sun radiated without screaming.

He ventured through a doorway into somebody's home and shouted at everyone to get down but there was nobody there. He decided to stay covered inside for a while, so he sat down in one of their chairs. One by one he tried all of the chairs and if they had left bowls of porridge out he would have gone around and taken a spoonful from each one. Arbop imagined the people who lived there going about their lives all around him, ghostly figures making dinner and jokes, translucent children playing games on the floor. Then he tried making them solid and himself invisible and imagined living with them for years that way, then none the wiser that he haunted their home except occasionally wondering where the extra food went, blaming each other for raids on the refrigerator and who let out that terrible smell. He imagined they had a pet who knew. He imagined he would befriend the pet and protect the family.

Family. Arbop's mother was driving one time, father in the passenger seat. To be fair it was a confusing intersection, made extra loud by the elevated trains running overhead. Arbop and his brother in back. She had pulled out to turn, unsure of the direction. "Right," his father had said. Left, she turned, a car oncoming. "Right! Right! Right!" they had all yelled, and she just stopped the car right in the middle of everything. They didn't get hit. A young couple looked out at them through the window of a Filipino restaurant, then back at each other. They may have been in love.

Back in the present moment Arbop took one last look at the house and the invisible family and left through the rear door. Now he was really lost. He had been separated from his unit and he couldn't remember what country he was in or how to tell people apart. He became very dizzy in the heat.

*Birdie Birdie.*

A real bird momentarily eclipsed the sun and the shadow flitted across Arbop's face, causing him to look up in a panic. Then there was a laugh, finally, only it came right out of the street beneath his feet and he decided it was really a bubbling sound from the sewer beneath the cobbles. The mockery of steamfitters. The building he leaned against seemed to creak as if it wanted to dry him right into the wall. Arbop slid down into a shivering crouch, telling himself to move, that he was losing it, to remember his training, to focus on one thing until it stopped moving falsely and started to move true.

Was it only a few minutes, or had it stretched into hours by now? It was too hot to tell, the air was too dry, the streets were too dusty, you couldn't tell anything about anything. It was just as likely that he had been crouched for days, even weeks, long abandoned, not having heard his name being called out over and over by the

search party, as it would surely have been. Why would he not have heard it? Perhaps he had been taken, in shock, by the enemy, and preserved in a useless state. Who's to say he was where he thought he was? In his mental state he could be anywhere. An asylum. Even likelier, he was lying in a bed in somebody's hospital or his brain had been put into a jar. Orderlies were very busy trying to improve what was doubtless still an experimental system of electrical impulses that would create simulated environments to stimulate a brain robbed of its sense-slaves. For now the recent empty memories of the streets where they had found him would have to suffice, poor bastard. Or had they even found him there? Or had they found him at all? Are we now supposed to believe history? Arbop would have liked to have heard one reason for that, but it would have had to have been a really good one.

He was trembling from head to foot now as if it were cold. He invented a new way of breathing that fit in with his trembling. Each exhale would get broken out into eighteen or twenty staccato puffs, little stutter steps, and each inhale as well. Noisy and through the nose, and the smell from the alleyway rubbish bins was like an oil that enveloped him, and he welcomed it as the only sensation that was communicating with him. *Old friend the smell*, he thought. Once the orderlies and scientists got things working better, it would be all freshly baked pies and young women from ancient times, with dark skin and Persian brown eyes with their own event horizons and bosomy languages curling like hookah smoke out of their lithe and musical throats.

“Crap!”

The voice came from the end of the alleyway, and Arbop became aware that the rising sound of coconuts in a big doll house was better explained by boots

running towards him on the cobble stones. Far away, far away, far away, suddenly the boots were next to him, and there were knees, and a hand was on his back.

“Battle sweats!” the voice shouted back to some others, hurting the ear of Arbop: collateral damage.

Arbop looked up and saw the face on the front of the head coming out of the neck of the familiar uniform, and it was his own face, but not really, not quite. It was his brother’s face, so the person was likely his brother, Oliver Arbop.

“It’s all right,” said Oliver. “It’s fine now. I’m here. I’m here. Don’t worry. It’s all right now.”

He said soothing things like that repeatedly until suddenly the others arrived as blurs with noise and hands and they hoisted up original Arbop and helped him along back to the mobile vehicular unit, stooping along as if under helicopter blades. As they pushed him up onto a seat he closed his eyes, and opened them back in the club, where the music was louder than ever.

“I’m so glad you’re all right,” said Oliver, putting his arm warmly around Arbop’s shoulders. So he was still there, happily unconcerned, and Effie was sitting next to him.

“Honestly,” she said, turning to face him, “we ought to go out more. We ought to make a point of it. You’re so unrelenting, seriously.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Arbop woke up light and energetic after what felt like an exceptionally good night's sleep, but there was a bad smell in the room. He spent a few minutes following his nose around and inspecting everything with it. Sniff. Sniff sniff sniff. Finally he thought he saw wisps of smoke coming from the Civic Centre. Not the real one: the tiny one. Was his city on fire? How could this be? But when he got up close to it, the smoke was gone and there was no way to tell whether he had only imagined it. He thought he had seen it; now it could not be seen. Even the smell was gone. Ah well. One shrugs and moves on. Except did he hear a tiny door slam? He smiled because he knew he had made that one up himself, a trick by and for his own brain. He pictured spiders hustling down a minuscule wooden hallway on their tippy toes.

Arbop felt good. There was a little spring in his step as he headed towards the bathroom to do his morning tooth brushing. He noticed the slug trail immediately, and repulsively enough it was not on the floor. A slug had come in once again, and this time it had done the rare thing. It had bothered to elevate, it had gone right up the side of his overstuffed armchair, his best piece of furniture, his manly seat of domestic power, and had tried it on for size. From even a cursory glance at the seat, the history of its journey was recorded clearly in slime. It had gone this way, it had gone that way, it had gone round and round. As usual, the strange thing was the lack of an exit line. All the meandering had taken place in the middle of the seat. How had the thing left? By what mechanism could it withhold the slime to disguise its destination? Did it leap? Did it pinch its slime valves and hold its breath to disguise its escape? Did all of this mean that the other slime trails were intentional? Was he being mocked? These things were probably knowable, but

Arbop knew he would never know them. He gave the chair an airy wipe with a flimsy tissue and all was clean and dry.

In the time he had before going to work, Arbop decided to avenge the crime of the presumably stolen statue by recreating it and putting it back in its rightful place in miniature. He had, fortunately, a small supply of generic figurines to give him a bit of a head start on monuments of this type and, fortunately as well, Ribemont-Dessaignes was a fairly generic-looking figure, especially in shrunken form. Arbop had only to add a modest moustache, a bit of hair above the ears, keeping the top of the head smooth and shiny, and dress the little fellow in an appropriate suit. A bit of paint, some supplementary clay to fill him out, a plinth, some glue, *et voilà*.

A ceremony of some sort seemed like a good idea, to mark the occasion of the restoration. Arbop assembled a number of figures in smart dress in the open space of Dada Park and created a *mise en scène*. Charlie Chaplin and Tristan Tzara were there, André Breton and Francis Picabia, a youthful Frida Kahlo, Harpo Marx, Lovie Austin, and King Oliver. Louis Aragon shook hands and shouted, thanking people for bringing their rifles. The statue of Ribemont-Dessaignes held a dictionary and read out word definitions at random while a ring of flappers curtsied. An orchestra comprising a peanut seller and a porcelain repair specialist played music on rubber bands. A small crowd of ordinary citizens gathered and soon got into the spirit of the event by assaulting the artists with cabbages, pennies, even the odd beef steak. Above them all a gaily fluttering banner read: Artificial Hell.

In the end it began to rain and the crowd largely dispersed, leaving only a few drenched gentlemen defacing five-franc notes with erotic symbols, and of course the statue. By the time it was all finished the park was a mess with bottles

and assorted bits of litter scattered throughout. Arbop sighed and had a few bitter thoughts about human nature but he steadfastly cleaned until the place was once again presentable. In doing so he nearly knocked over the monument at Circle Square with his elbow. It wobbled and tottered ominously and Arbop held his breath. If it fell there would likely be a domino effect. In the end he was able very carefully to stabilise the thing with a well-placed forefinger, and then to set it precisely in the middle of its platform in the square. This was a mistake of course. The real monument was famously off centre. Arbop didn't notice, because he was by now in danger of being late for work. He also knew that if anything was amiss, he'd be able to tend to it properly in the fullness of time, as he was not one to neglect his city for long.

Arbop's front door was small on this occasion and he could open it almost too easily. Yaro looked him up and down when he emerged.

"What a ruckus!" she remarked.

"I'd have invited you," said Arbop, "but it really was quite a small, private ceremony in the end."

"It'll all be in my report," said Yaro.

"That is what the city pays you for," rejoined Arbop.

By the time Arbop made it to CPP HQ to check in and see if there were any special alerts, there was already a certain frisson in the air. Things were anything but normal in the city. Something was afoot.

"We need to talk," said G. "We think there's been a breach."

"What have you got for me?" said Arbop, his adrenaline threatening to compromise the deadly serious face he was trying to maintain.

“Things are starting to happen fast,” said G. “First off, that statue is back. Second...”

“Wait,” said Arbop. “The statue? Is back?”

“Mm hm. But that ain’t the half of it. Check it. There was an event at Circle Square.”

Arbop started to get a funny feeling in his stomach as he listened to G’s description of the event.

Circle Square had been bustling as usual with the midday shopping and lunch crowds, but the sudden commotion that broke out was different from the normal hubbub. People stopped what they were doing in order to pay attention. Something was happening at the monument. People stood up suddenly like prairie dogs and drifted into a loose formation like birds in each other’s upwash.

It was windy and the sky had darkened. Hats blew past. Hands went to heads. Anyone who looked up saw a swirling sky as no fewer than five tornadoes formed from above and slowly extended downward around the monument. The air spun with objects, making the scene far more obviously three-dimensional than usual. Paper croissant takeaway bags and dried leaves and long scarves began to revolve in lengthening spirals centred on Circle Square. Parents hustled away objecting children who wanted to stay and watch; young women from the university made the appropriate exclamations, apart from one or two who smoked and looked bored; their young male counterparts tentatively feigned insouciance, apart from one or two who flat out bolted; an old man smiled as he sat on his bench and whispered something that made his wife slap him on the shoulder in mock rebuke.

The general murmuring of wows and oh-my-gods spiked into genuine screams when the tornadoes closed in and the monument began to teeter and totter.



The assemblage of people shifted their behaviour fully into disaster mode. The delightful oddness had become a dangerous event. People lost their inhibitions and their conventions and became comfortable with the panic and the running that had up to that point been embraced only by a very few prescient or nervous individuals. Not everybody was fleeing the scene, of course. There are always a few who stay simply because most others are leaving, people in whom catastrophe brings out a touch of the old bravado, or who feel that the danger is overblown, that even given the fact of a falling monument, the likelihood of it falling directly on them is relatively low. Fear, too, can freeze a person to the spot, as can a sense of unreality, a suspicion that what is unfolding is some sort of gag. There are also, it must be remembered, a few who desire death and dare it to take them. So there were witnesses.

The monument tipped this way and that, its concrete block of a head menacing people first hither, then yon. Finally, to the gasps of those observing, it lifted off its moorings completely, raised more or less directly up some sixty metres, and then — still firmly encircled by tornadoes — placed carefully back down where it had stood, only more perfectly. The tornadoes waned, the winds abated, and the clouds dissipated. Objects behaved according to the usual dictates of cement and gravity.

People slowly emerged from hiding places and approached the monument, no longer tilting or wobbling, looking as if it had been planted in exactly its present position for hundreds of years, as if, like a tree, it had roots that went as deep into the ground as the trunk rose high. It was now centred on its base as the original planners had first envisioned before the rage of unmet expectations.

One brave woman approached the thing, reached out tentatively, and first touched, then speculatively pushed against the monument. Those who saw her do it drew breath in sharply and stepped back. But the monument did not move. Having seen her experiment, a teenage boy hurled himself against the tall column with all his might and a loud scream. The monument held firm. Soon a kind of hysteria broke out with people joining hands and throwing themselves backwards against the thing as one, to no effect. They quickly got tired, but they were satisfied. Things were solid.

The wisps of clouds that remained dwindled into nothingness, leaving a bright blue sky and an anticlimactic sense of disappointment in place of the wind. The massive columnar tribute to concrete realism wasn't going anywhere, all the tests agreed, to the extent that nobody was sure any more what they had really seen anyway. Probably it hadn't moved. How could it have? But those who were there would never quite trust that bastard monument again. How could they?

G explained all of this to Arbop, only more briefly, and in his own words.

Arbop checked the background of the office for Grimsbian motion.

"And you found who did it?" he whispered. "Breachers?"

"Not yet," said G. "But there was some kind of illicit activity going on in the basement of the Civic Centre last night. They went crazy in there. Whoever it was didn't get in the front door. Probably tunnelled in."

"Was there a DJ at this party playing some sort of Hindi trance music?"

"I never said it was a party."

"It was a hunch."

"It was a party."

Arbop unconsciously licked his lips as if thirsty. The two men nodded at each other.

“And this was a real party?” asked Arbop.

“Meaning?”

“It actually happened in real life. Full size. It wasn’t something that anyone imagined.”

“I see. No, real life. We think so. Yes.”

Arbop didn’t know what to think, believe, or say, so he nodded idiotically before speaking.

“So who was it?”

“I think we all know who it was.”

“Evidence?”

“Not much,” said G.

G reached under his counter and produced a cardboard box. He slid it purposefully across to Arbop and invited him to have a look. Arbop opened the lid and saw inside. He stared silently for a few moments, and then dumped out the contents. A shirt, some trousers, a pair of socks, and some underwear. All his. The things, he believed, that he was wearing in his dream.

“Tells you what kind of party it was,” said G. “Clothes flying off and whatnot. These people are animals.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s the matter?” asked G, seeing Arbop’s confused expression.

Arbop looked at him and considered his options swiftly.

“These are my clothes,” he said; G laughed.

“Tell you what it is,” began G when he had composed himself, and then he went off on a long tangent about how the real replaces itself, becomes a non-real real, something other than real but standing in its place, fuzziness and probabilities removed, only simple certainty remaining. Maybe instead of seeing a thing you see one or two qualities, which you then harp on to the point of exaggeration, you brighten them up so you’re blind to other aspects, the original thing yields to caricature, maybe starts to act like its flawed description, description mutates into prescription. A truth becomes a falsehood by virtue of what it distorts and omits, like an unfortunate nickname that sticks. All of this, but in his own words.

“A nickname?” asked Arbop.

“Sure,” said G. “Like Pencil Dick McManus.”

Arbop went outside to take up patrolling. He didn’t know anybody named McManus and he didn’t have his clothes custom made. Those clothes from the party he wasn’t even really at might have been anybody’s. Everybody thinks they’re unique but they are doubtless much more alike than they realise. All their quirks have been sold to them off of a large and nuanced shelf. All sorts of motifs are in the air, part of the zeitgeist. Things that seem like unlikely convergences are in fact inevitable. People don’t understand statistics; they prefer to believe in miracles. Coincidence is just a matter of fact and probability. Anything with a one in a billion chance will happen given a billion chances, and if you happen to be standing there — somebody will happen to be standing there — and if it’s you, well, enjoy the illusion that you’re special. So went Arbop’s thoughts. Coincidence is always the preferred explanation when the alternative is delusion. Not that those are always the only two choices.

He was even more vigilant than usual on his patrol that afternoon, if such a thing is even possible. Not content merely to look for people insulting the perimeter, Arbop also heightened his general sensitivities to the likelihood of remote improbabilities and to the colours of young children's knitted cardigans and to whether or not people closed their eyes when they chewed. Primarily one had to expect the unexpected in the CPP, only without letting that expectation force the unexpected to be exactly what one expected. On the way out to his sector there was a suspiciously regal woman on the train with golden skin and stupendous hair, wrapped in a colourful scarf, piling straight up about thirty feet into the air. Arbop imagined that it penetrated the roof of the train and brushed against the ceiling of the tunnel itself; he worried that it would be getting very dirty. This woman, this queen sat very straight as if everyone were there at her pleasure, nodding as if to confirm both everyone's suspicions and that everything was all right. A man nearby hesitated, standing. She nodded at him and he understood it was all right to sit in the small space next to her. Her lips didn't move but everyone heard it: "You'll fit." She was probably thousands of years old and had probably crossed the perimeter from Egypt where she had probably overseen the construction of pyramids. The things she had seen! How many had she killed, and who had betrayed her? The thought of what she had probably suffered through the ages boggled the mind. She bore watching but there was no sense arresting her. In fact he would die defending her should the need arise. Such was her ancient power when applied to Arbop's real sympathies.

Breaching personal boundaries. A young man with no shirt on alarmed everyone by suddenly entering the train carriage. Where was his shirt? Had he left it somewhere? Why? Clothes certainly seemed to be appearing and disappearing

around the city lately, just something worth noting, that's all. There was a caginess in the way he moved his wiry body, an unpredictability, and he bobbed and weaved to the end of the car seemingly like he might just punch someone at random or put his nose in someone's face and go booga booga booga or ritualistically carve out his own intestines. He opened the door between cars that you're not supposed to open and stepped halfway into the forbidden zone. Only one foot kept him linked to Arbop and his fellow riders heading down down down, downtown, the other resting in that dark space about which many tragic stories had circulated. He was peering intently into the other carriage, looking for god knows what. Next thing you know he was back, addressing everyone as if they were an audience, welcoming them, forcing them to engage, offering fist bumps. The first man declined the fist bump, a bad start. What a sullen grump that man was, intent on his little screen, having become his own frown. Perhaps it is just that he didn't know how to make a fist or was afraid he would do it wrong. How often we rush to judgement. What would happen if everyone refused? That would make the world a cruel place. Why are we here, with each other, just to keep our heads down and ignore everything? Arbop was the second one to receive the offer. Immediately he held out his fist and endeavoured not to screw it up, for example by making a glancing blow that clumsily slid off the little finger edge. It was not a perfect fist bump but it was no travesty. The next three people also obliged, one of them only after a reluctant pause, and then the man turned on a small but powerful music machine and performed a show consisting of an athletic display of climbing, swirling, and holding difficult poses on poles. He passed his hat so swiftly at the end that Arbop didn't even have time to give him money, even though he was seriously considering it. He did feel threatened, but not enough to make a full report.

Another petitioner had the misfortune of coming in right behind the athlete, a ragged wreck of a man, beyond the beyond. He was past asking, past tugging the forelock, he came in and shouted, bending over to put his wretchedness literally in people's faces, "they all ignore me, they all ignore me" he shouted, "they don't want to look here, they want to look there," he shouted. True enough, everyone looked anywhere else in shame and endured it. Arbop had already had his finger on some money so he alone produced some, unable to shake off the idea that this could be grey-eyed Athena in disguise.

The escalator up to his sector was one of the longest in the world. On a sunny day you couldn't see the end of it, but only a bright hazy glow that made you wince as you majestically ascended. He heard somebody assembling a fully automatic weapon behind him, getting ready to fire indiscriminately and wipe everybody out before they had a chance to duck down. Only a lucky few would survive, the quick, those who received the blessing of time to process and react, never to feel safe again, not even after the attacker blew his own head off or was taken out by the police. But it was no such thing. Arbop whipped his head around and it was just a mild-looking fellow in tweed popping open his briefcase. What a sound! The man smiled. What a nice man.

Rats in the bushes. Hustlers. People who walk with an aggressive, get-out-of-my-way bounce. The bushes themselves. Litter. Dog shit. Ragpicker poets. The clouds were ominous, the horns all honked, the movie you wanted to see was sold out, the slugs were definitely up to something, everything smelled like pretzels, and nearby someone always laughed. This was not paranoia. These were just games Arbop liked to play, to expect the unexpected without expecting it. Everyone a suspect, everyone in love, in love with Arbop, the love returned. His mind felt loose,

besieged, ready. He cast his ambulatory gaze upon the city. It was his job to reconcile the imagined with the material.

The idea was that you didn't know what you were looking for but you'd know it when you saw it. If you saw something, you said something. Everything and anyone was possible. Arbop didn't stumble on any bodies strewn about that day himself, but across the city three more were found, all of them understood to be tangents to the main narrative. In each case the citizenry was relieved to be informed that the perpetrators had all been identified and captured, pending an investigation.

Arbop stretched his arms and legs, and looked straight up into the sky. It looked like a great big glass dome. Wouldn't it be funny, Arbop thought, if the whole world was really somebody else's snow globe? He wouldn't have been surprised if it suddenly shook violently and began to snow plastic flakes through liquid air.



## CHAPTER SIX

Oliver walked in and found Arbop lost in gazing at the snow globe. Arbop was imagining that he had a tiny life down there, inside the globe, perhaps as some sort of perimeter security guard for some sort of civilian agency, protecting the glass bubble against catastrophic breaches. Perhaps he would even build himself an even tinier city in his own already-tiny house, and let part of himself reside there, and look down upon himself fondly. Perhaps he'd be lonely down there. Lonely and fragile and uncertain and looked down upon by a gigantic version of himself who was not lonely. Maybe there'd be an infinity of smaller and larger Arbops, looking up and down at each other. Mostly down. What are fake snowflakes made of, he wondered. Probably plastic. He wondered if his tiny snow globe self knew the snowflakes weren't real. Probably not. They'd be as real as he was. Who was he to judge, in his condescending giganticness?

Effie had her arm tenderly around Arbop's shoulder, her other hand unconsciously stroking her own belly, cradle of life. Arbop didn't appear to notice Oliver right away, absorbed as he was in the idiotic fascination. Oliver put his hands on his hips, wittily assuming the role of the one who would have to maintain discipline over this blissful spaced-out couple. Not that it was perfect! Arbop had to bear as stoically as possible Effie's habit of licking her lips repeatedly in small rapid motions after sipping wine, like she was some kind of connoisseur. For her part, Effie, try as she might, could never get Arbop to tend the Normann. He'd work the Normann but he wouldn't tend it. The Normann had been ludicrously expensive, a functional rubber *objet d'art* from the museum gift shop, yet Arbop persisted in treating it like an ordinary dishwashing tub. All you had to do was rinse and dry it when you were done, as if it were the final dish, a simple part of the job like wiping

the stove, but no. He wouldn't. It would get mouldy, which was disgusting, but the worst of it was his condescending smile, like it was she who was being silly about it. But these were not the enormous problems they liked to pretend they were. They were going to handle parenthood just fine. The pregnancy was among the most intentional ever conceived.

"So what's going on down there?" asked Oliver, nodding at the snow globe and hoping to startle his brother.

"Ah," said Arbop, who had only been pretending not to notice him. "Worlds within worlds, my brother."

"A better world?" asked Effie, gently teasing.

Arbop placed the globe back down on the mantelpiece and smiled.

"Terrible," said Arbop, and everyone laughed.

"Well," said Oliver. "I guess we'd better get going. We don't want to keep the man waiting."

"No," agreed Arbop.

"You all right walking?" asked Oliver.

"Yeah," said Arbop, whose foot was still wrapped in bandages from a recent incident of accidental heroics.

Oliver had a car and the three of them went outside and got into it. It was mutually understood that music was good, so Oliver took the liberty of turning on the radio. Nobody had any smirks about Johnny Cash falling into a burning ring of fire, going down down down as the flames went higher.

None of them had ever been to the White House before so they had to pull up to the front gate and ask about where they were supposed to park. They got waved through and parked surprisingly close to the front door. A wheelchair instantly

appeared for Arbop and he tried to wave it off as unnecessary. The official who had wheeled it out, however, had a kindly face and he smiled at Arbop.

“You trying to get me in trouble with the boss now?” he joked.

Arbop agreed to be wheeled into the White House in the chair, flanked on one side by Oliver and on the other by Effie. Immediately upon entering they were greeted by a broadly smiling President John Fitzgerald Kennedy and his impossibly elegant wife Jacqueline in a canary yellow dress with big buttons, pearl necklace, and one of her iconic matching pillbox hats.

“I’m guessing Mr Arbop is the fellow in the wheelchair here with his foot wrapped in bandages,” joked the president.

“Please,” said Arbop, “just call me Arbop.”

“Not Bodhamari? Am I pronouncing that right?”

“Perfect,” said Arbop. “My friends all call me Arbop though. Or Be-Bop Arty Bopalicious. You can make up your own. Can I call you JFK?”

“My friends call me Jack. This is my wife, Jackie. Jack and Jackie. Disgusting right? Don’t shoot us because we’re cute!”

“It’s an honour. This is my wife, Effie, and my brother Oliver Arbop.”

“Do I call him Arbop too then?”

“No, you call him Oliver.”

“Hi,” said Oliver.

“Hello,” said Effie with an involuntary curtsy.

“Let’s go on up to the Red Room,” said Jacqueline Kennedy. “We can play cards, smoke cigars, get some music going.”

The Red Room was, disappointingly, decorated largely in shades of red. Arbop had hoped the name referred obliquely to something scandalous involving

murder and illicit sex, and the room itself would be in an ironic or merely baffling non-red. Jacqueline went on at length about the history and furnishings of the room, 1819 this, burgundy silk velvet that, Truman, Louis XVI, American Empire style, blah blah blah, as if anyone cared about any of it. Arbop, while bored, assumed she was just doing it to be polite. They probably had a lot of guests in the White House who pretended to care about this kind of banal nonsense.

Jack Kennedy pulled five chairs upholstered in cerise silk patterned with medallions, scrolls, and fruits copied from a two-hundred-year-old Gallic document around a *Lannuier guéridon* from the same period with inlaid Italian marble and gilded bronze mounts. Then he offered around some Cuban cigars and, with a rakish grin, riffled through a classic deck of Bicycle playing cards.

“Poker?” he said, wiggling his eyebrows like Groucho Marx. “We’ll just use chips. No real money.”

Just then Effie let out a shriek of terror, causing everyone in the room to jump in alarm.

“Oh!” she said, recovering herself somewhat and even forcing a laugh. “I’m so sorry! Oh my God. I didn’t see that man when we came in. He startled me. I’m so sorry. Oh! That was weird.”

“I beg your pardon, ma’am,” said the man, who was even wearing a burgundy suit and wasn’t given to making himself overly noticeable.

“Ah!” said President Kennedy as Jacqueline lightly tapped herself on the chest in mock recovery from a shock. “That’s just our Grimsby, Secret Service, don’t mind him, don’t mind him one bit. I never notice him myself whether or not he dresses to blend in. In fact I forgot he was a real person, I’ve taken to thinking of

him as a mere shadow, my own of course. Grimsby, if you startle my guests again I'll have you beheaded."

"Of course, sir," said Grimsby, bowing slightly. "I do beg your pardon, ma'am."

"No, it's all right," blushed Effie. "I must be jumpy today!"

"He frightens me two or three times a day," stage whispered Jacqueline, leaning forward in feminine confidence. "I'll never get used to him."

Grimsby, impassive, merely stood.

"So anyway," said President Kennedy, exuding good cheer enough for everyone and dealing out a hand of five-card draw. "Let's stop beating around the bush. There's one thing I need to know. Absolutely need to know. And Arbop, you're the only one who can tell me."

"OK," said Arbop, picking up his cards one by one and getting into the proper frame of mind to make a frank and truthful statement.

"You're a grown man," said Kennedy.

"Yes."

"That's not what I needed to know, I already knew that. I'm just establishing the context for my question."

"Right."

"I'm guessing thirty-seven? And I don't under-guess on purpose to flatter. Not with men anyway. Not ever. No, that's my real best guess."

"Thirty-eight."

"Aha, you see, you really do look slightly young for your age. And you, Effie, you're about twenty-four."

"Ha ha," said Effie.

Kennedy looked at Oliver and frowned.

“Sixty,” deadpanned the president, and everyone laughed because Oliver was clearly forty-two. “But Arbop, seriously, here’s what I want to know. Do you, a grown man of thirty-eight winters, normally do cartwheels?”

“No.”

“I mean, are you prone to them?”

“Not at all.”

“I thought not. I thought not. Because it’s the spontaneous sort of thing that, I daresay, at the risk of being sexist, that quite young girls might suddenly do. I’m not questioning your manhood, not in the least, that’s not the point. Do you get me?”

“I do.”

“It’s a question of what possessed you, in other words.”

“Exactly. I understand.”

“I’ve wondered that myself,” said Effie, earnestly.

“Me too,” said Oliver.

“Well it’s a good thing for us that you did,” said Jacqueline, folding her cards and pushing them delicately away.

“No question about that,” said the president. “I may surround myself with a special new cartwheeling division of the Secret Service from now on, I mean I really might. It’d be better than whatever they were doing that day, no offence over there, Grimsby. I’d just like for this whole thing to seem more real. Put me inside your head.”

“Well,” began Arbop, “I recall thinking about youth. It’s not that I was so overjoyed by the passing of your motorcade that I couldn’t restrain myself.”

“I wouldn’t imagine so.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I was happy to be there. But at the same time it was like I was somewhere else. I was ruminating. There you were, the young president, and I was idly considering my own age I suppose, and my own life, almost nonverbally. I would say I found myself resisting the idea that I was slowly turning into an insignificant failure. And just — a great big stiff. Is that putting it too frankly?”

“Not at all.”

“Good.”

“This country could use more of exactly that sort of forthrightness.”

“Thank you. And there was in fact a young girl there who did do a cartwheel, so effortlessly, without thought. Without trying. She just did it as I might scratch my nose. She couldn’t have been more than seven, which is probably prime cartwheeling age. I guess the short answer is I wondered if I could do it. I never could, not even as a child. I began to wonder if I might be able to do it, even now, if I simply did it. Without thinking. Mind over matter. A triumph of will, or of the spirit.”

“To hell with rules and expectations,” suggested Kennedy.

“To hell with them.”

“To hell with the weight of regrets and guilts and shames!”

“Straight to hell!”

“You felt it, so you did it.”

“So I did.”

“He was hearkening back to a more innocent time,” said Jacqueline. “I mean perhaps.”

“I think so too,” said Effie.

“Makes sense,” said Oliver.

“Anybody got jacks or better?” asked the president.

“I can open,” said Oliver. “One chip?”

“Good man,” said the president. “I’m in for a chip.”

Arbop folded, but Effie was in for a chip as well.

“To think,” said Jacqueline all of a sudden, with a small mischievous smile that revealed she felt a risk in venturing a clever remark, “how the world turns on a cartwheel.”

Nobody laughed more heartily than the president himself, who then set about the business of giving people the number of cards they requested. But after a few hands involving ordinary banter, President Kennedy had the old twinkle in his eye once again.

“By the way, Arbop,” he said, barely keeping his grin in check. “I’ve got something for you. Grimsby!”

“Sir?”

“Bring it.”

“Yes sir.”

Kennedy’s Grimsby opened a drawer and retrieved a small jar, which he dutifully brought over to the president. Kennedy thanked him, grinning broadly now, and practically slammed the jar down onto the inlaid Italian marble. He slid the jar across the table straight towards Arbop.

“I believe these are yours,” he said.

“Jack!” said a genuinely yet slightly horrified Jacqueline, prettily slapping the presidential shoulder.

The jar contained two badly disfigured toes.



“Those are never Bodhamari’s toes,” said Oliver. “Look how bruised they are.”

“Well,” said Arbop, “I’ll take the president’s word for it.”

“Oh they’re yours all right,” said Kennedy. “The bullet intended for my brains blew these toes right off your foot in mid cartwheel, causing them to spin some fifty meters through the air and bounce off the face of a bystander on the other side of Elm Street. Do you already know all this?”

“Not really. Not the details.”

“Right. Well. That bystander looked around to see what hit him, saw toes on the ground, picked them up, and was still standing there trying to make sense of the whole thing when our Grimsby here took the toes off his hands. The FBI has determined that these little metatarsals changed the trajectory of the bullet just enough that it sailed between my head and Jackie’s here before hitting a curb behind us. It’s a miracle nobody was hurt.”

Jacqueline Kennedy reached out to grab the president’s hand and squeeze it. He squeezed it back and gave her an affectionate, if somewhat distant and patriarchal, look.

“It’s amazing,” said Effie, shaking her head in wonder. “A couple of toes.”

“Yes, well, enough about me,” said the president. “There’s something a little more important going on. You know what I’m talking about, Arbop?”

“No, sir.”

“Yes you do. Let me tell you a little secret. I have a personal rule. Here it is: I don’t care how pregnant a woman looks. She can be nine months pregnant. I don’t care. I am not going to say anything about pregnancy until I am told for a fact that she is with child. Because if she’s not, well that’s one mistake I am personally never

going to make. Ever again. Fortunately, as president, I have entire intelligence agencies to acquire reliable data for me. And I believe congratulations are in order.”

President Kennedy produced a gift wrapped in expensive-looking paper and handed it to Effie, who bashfully opened it, charming everyone. It was a package of soft organic all-cotton onesies in neutral beige bearing the official presidential seal complete with eagle and coat of arms. Effie effusively thanked the president; Arbop put his loving arm around his wife; Jackie Kennedy reached out and touched Effie’s knee in feminine solidarity. Oliver, who had been thinking about bringing up the subject of war, decided not to.

The whole thing would have made a lovely *tableau vivant* inside another snow globe within an even bigger political imaginary, *ab nihilo, ad infinitum*.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

There are different ways of knocking on doors, one to suit each personality type and mood. This one tended towards the loud and abrupt end of the spectrum. Bang bang bang! Arbop was so startled that he knocked over the tiny sports arena he had been touching up. It was too loud to be Yaro. For all her intrusiveness, she had a relatively light touch. He approached the door cautiously.

“Who is it?”

“It’s the wolf!”

Arbop opened the door a crack.

“It’s Ganizani,” said Yaro. “I ratted you out.”

It was G, standing there smirking.

“Ganizani?” asked Arbop. “I never knew that.”

“You never asked,” said G.

G was invited in and explanations were made: Yaro had ratted him out. In light of the recent trouble at the monument, she, like all the other guards and guards of guards, *ab nihilo, ad infinitum*, had done the only responsible thing and searched her own charge for incriminating anomalies. Anything intriguing about her Arbop? One or two items. There were of course the letters from well outside the bounds, the letters from Oliver. These were by their very existence suspicious. They indicated an unhealthy connection with extra-perimeter activities and by themselves were worthy of watch-listing. Their content only exacerbated the situation; they were by any measure overwrought. They reeked of subversion. Yaro was almost concerned that she herself would be investigated for not having reported them earlier. That’s what you get for cutting a fellow some slack.

And secondly of course it had not escaped her notice that Arbop had wobbled the monument in its tininess in a way that presciently pre-reflected the full-sized event that was shortly to follow. Yaro wasn't stupid. She knew as well as John Q Einstein that correlation does not prove causation, she had her *propter hoc*s in order. She also added "wobbling the monument" to her personal list of amusing euphemisms, along with recent additions "harassing the general," "stoking regional tensions," and "rejuvenating the party apparatus." Yes, yes, yes, it was all almost certainly a mere fascinating coincidence in light of the absolute implausibilities involved, but in the surveillance business there's a premium on covering one's behind. If it can be filed, it should be filed. File it all and let the superiors sort it out.

Arbop reported to G, as is well known. That is why it was up to G to take a personal interest in the matter. Arbop was not in trouble, nor was he under investigation. CPP would have been remiss, however, not to jot its t's, tittle its i's, and instigate a performance review, for which Arbop was nearly due in any case. G would ask a few questions, tick a few boxes, and join Arbop to observe him in his work for the day, all perfectly routine and nothing to be alarmed about.

"You may as well know," said Arbop. "You bashed the door so hard just now that I destroyed the arena. Perhaps we should check the news."

The two men laughed nervously and, after an awkward pause, checked the news. The real arena was no worse for wear. Then they checked the tiny version, it was also intact. Had Arbop put it back? Of course he had. This was no time for superstition or magic. He'd have done it right away, instinctively, before answering the door. Everyone was a little jumpy these days.

"Now," said G, "I have a few questions to ask you about these letters I'm hearing about."

“From my brother, yes, so?”

“He’s, uhhh...”

“Over the rainbow, yes, scarpered, it’s well known.”

It was established that nobody was under suspicion, no wrong-doing had occurred, everything was just routine, this was all quite normal under the state of emergency that quite naturally existed. Everything had to be done by the book, that’s all, and everybody needed just to calm down. Still, the nature of the correspondence warranted the appropriate level of concern.

“Let me put it to you straight, Bops,” said G. “Between you and me, are you having unhealthy thoughts here about maybe aiding and abetting, maybe violating the perimeter personally?”

*Violating the perimeter*, thought Yaro with a short chuckle.

Arbop suppressed his natural impulses, which were to lash out and escalate the situation. These were strange times. Cautious times.

“My personal thoughts have never been more healthy,” said Arbop.

“Well good,” said G. “That’s good.”

“Shall we?” said Arbop.

He meant that it was the time when he would normally be heading out to work, and was inviting G to join him, which in any case G intended to do. The mood instantly lightened; they were friends again. The tough questions had been asked, the boxes ticked. All that remained was a lovely afternoon of perambulating and delighting in the fabled spores and odours of life while keeping on the professional side of passion, and of course confirming what was already presumed, that Arbop was fully competent in meeting the demands of his job. There was bound to be a cappuccino in it for the two of them at some point as well.

Arbop's sector was in the northeast quadrant, last neighbourhood before the swamps. The city was surrounded. What wasn't cemeteries was marshland, dotted with decayed industrial machinery and abandoned factories that once made pipe fittings, axle parts, bearings, and circuit breakers. Great blue herons patrolled what was outside the perimeter; the CPP covered the rest. They had to take the 9 train all the way to the end of the line to get there, and on the way they were treated to some typical 9 line society.

They got a glimpse into panhandler etiquette, for example, when two of them entered the carriage by different doors, a man under a hat and a woman on top of a cane. The man started in right away with his "Hello ladies and gentlemen good afternoon, I'm sorry to bother you, I don't sing or dance, I'm just a...oh, I'm sorry, I didn't even see you."

He was talking to the woman, who had begun to make her way along on her cane. She waved at him to continue but he was clearly uncomfortable, as if he had transgressed the unwritten law. Perhaps they had come from the same prior train; perhaps it was her turn. In any case, she simultaneously accepted that he was in the wrong and waved him on to continue now that he had started. The result was ten seconds of silence that captivated the car more than any pitch had ever done. Finally he began again, the same spiel, word for word only much quieter, without any enthusiasm, a rote recital. All the while the woman made her way slowly to the other end of the car and went through the forbidden door. The man elicited no donations nor did he expect any. Arbop did not feel that he could possibly have been grey-eyed Athena, who would never have stumbled like that. At the next stop the man got off, quietened. One felt that his day had been ruined. Had he come back on, he might

have cleaned up on contributions of sympathy and respect. One hopes he shook it off.

On stepped a preacher. She was not easy to understand but one got the gist. It had to do with Jesus, on the one hand, or hellfire, on the other. She had with her a diagram featuring charming misspellings, the message clear enough with heaven on top, human faith or lack thereof in the middle, and hellfire on the bottom, with arrows along drawings of steps indicating which paths led to which result. What struck Arbop and prevented his usual condescension about religious claptrap was the woman's overwhelming impression of niceness. She seemed a bit old and a bit down on her luck. She wasn't asking for anything, which is always a relief. There was no hellfire in her voice. She knew how to speak loudly enough to be heard without seeming to shout. She wanted to say her thing. That's all. The rest was up to everyone else. Arbop felt proud, because this was more or less his territory and he was able effectively to demonstrate to G the sorts of things that happened and his own tolerance, which he hoped was obvious for all to see, and which would be in the exact right proportion without remotely indicating excessive laxity. His watchful eye made all the difference. Watchful, but not stupid.

Then an angry shout interrupted the woman. Something profane about being quiet. Then nothing. Arbop looked at G. They had no jurisdiction but as CPP agents they both hoped that would be the end of that. No. After another half minute the shouter shouted again, full of swear words and anger. He didn't take kindly much to preachers on trains. He began to assert that he had been at work, strong emphasis, and that he shouldn't have to listen to this nonsense — he used a much stronger word — after a full day of that.

The woman ignored him for a while, and there were many people between the two of them. The man continued and his abusiveness reached a level approaching violence. If G hadn't been there perhaps Arbop would have remained silent, but in the event, he felt he was on trial. Besides, he was standing right next to the seated shouter. The man's anger was jarring and painful. Arbop suddenly spoke up, and in defence of a preacher!

"At least she's not shouting unpleasantly," said Arbop, facing the man without being afraid. "At least she's not swearing her head off."

Arbop had escalated the situation. The man turned to him with rage. G turned his body in an Arbop-defending direction. The man shouted a few obscene suggestions about Arbop and the woman going off to church together, as Arbop considered that it was difficult for someone to seem more ridiculous than a religious fanatic, but that this fellow was doing it with ease.

"I've got the right to say what I want in this country," the man screamed, peppering the sentiment with dirty words, "just like this lady here!"

Arbop gave him a raised eyebrow and smirk that said aha, so you admit it, the lady has rights. There was a satisfying moment's pause as the man realised his error, but to his intellectual credit, he quickly rode the plot twist in its new direction.

"She can say what she wants," he declared, "and I can say what I want. Go ahead and try to talk over me! I can talk louder than anyone!"

Would further intervention be necessary? Would his rage-fuelled jabbing finger turn into a shove or a punch? Did the woman need help? No, she remained perfectly calm. She approached him and stood right in front of him and directed her words to him personally, emitting religious nonsense in very reasonable tones. The



word blasphemy was quietly and patiently used. The man shouted over her. It went on and on and it was clear it would go nowhere. It was stable and eternally pointless.

To Arbop the shouter seemed like a hand grenade with the pin pulled but many on the car laughed carelessly, as if the exhibition were entertainment. With each new shout, each new insult, each new profanity, the uproarious laughter grew. An artificial hell. Arbop wished there were a peanut orchestra. He wished for Harpo Marx.

Arbop and G outlasted almost everyone, headed as they were to the terminal stop. Rage man left. Jesus lady moved on. Peace returned to the land. Then another shouty swearing man came on talking ambiently about indictments and murder and money and laughing like a cartoon villain at the idea that people would call *him* crazy. "They want to kill *me*? Over a *woman*? And *money*? Like *that's* going to solve their problems? And they call *me* crazy? Bwa ha ha ha ha!" But he soon got off as well.

"I had a crazy dream," said Arbop to G on the escalator at the end of the line. "I had saved JFK's life."

"You weren't even born yet."

"We were friends."

"You know his brain is missing right?" said G.

"I've heard that somewhere, but..."

"Oh it's true. For real. His. Brain. Is. Missing."

They marvelled inarticulately for a moment at the paranoid surrealist absurdity of simple facts, and their power to taunt from considerable historical distance.

“It went like this,” said G. “You had a brain blown half away, right? Jackie collecting up bits of it off the trunk of the car, chunks of it on the motorcycle cop by the rear bumper, doctors describing it in detail, autopsy photos, skull destroyed, half the brain gone. There’s photos of it, right? But wait. There’s other photos, skull intact. Brain weight in the autopsy report, not less than normal, more than normal. What’s going on? Who knows. Can we see the brain? No. It’s missing. The thing goes missing. The brain is gone. Strange but true. That’s how it went down.”

“I heard his brother took custody,” said Arbop.

“I heard that too.”

They imagined it. Robert Kennedy, pulling a few silent strings, shaking a few hands, making a few deals, claiming the brain of his dead brother, insisting on total secrecy, sliding it into some sort of bag or box, leaving a bit of brain slime as the only trail, sneaking off with it into the furtive night. They imagined he made a gruesome shrine with it in a glass jar in a special room under low light, a brain globe, and danced around it wildly wearing a grass skirt; also that he put it in the family vault and forbade anyone to think about it with his pointy pointy finger; or put it in the walls and listened to it pulsing night after night until it must have driven him nearly mad. They imagined that he paced around in the murky hush of semidarkness having anxiety attacks that anyone might ever get their hands on it and make of it a galling sideshow attraction at some cheap amusement park. They imagined his motive. It would have had something to do with honouring the dead and making sure murders were not investigated to the point of disrespect. They imagined the Robert Kennedy family sometimes taking it out for a guilty peek and silently going ewwwww and probably burning some incense. Maybe they had it cast

as a puzzle, in pieces, taking it half apart, putting it back together, learning the trick of it, whole, half, whole, half.

Robert Kennedy didn't last forever himself. Were his dying words "the brain...hide the brain..."? Did one of his many children inherit the grisly heirloom and the obligation to maintain *omerta* for obscure family reasons? Perhaps, long before that time, there was a black-robed fire ceremony before some giant hircine phantasm. Perhaps the brain was buried in a secret location known only to the sanguinea. These were all things that could be pictured, and Arbop did picture them, and they did not make the world a saner place.

"Effie was there," said Arbop, hanging his head slightly.

"Where?"

"In the dream."

"You need to check your *own* brain, amigo."

"Could be half missing."

"Or completely bogus."

They were looking for tunnels and the overly peculiar, including the peculiarly normal. They knew the difficulties. They both understood that when sane people check into an asylum for experimental purposes, the doctors cannot tell them from the deranged. Plenty of the deranged, outside of asylums, can be spotted with no trouble on subway trains. They can't hide anything. They have no boundaries; their perimeters are breached all to hell. Subway system notwithstanding, they're not true tunnel folk. They must not be the sort who end up in asylums. The possibility that only the sane end up in asylums cannot be dismissed; it would explain the difficulties of telling the inmates from the journalists and sociologists. Perhaps the loony bins were full of nothing but researchers, nobody told the doctors, nobody was

authorised, there was nothing in the files. So it was a difficult job, identifying the truly suspicious. If they could find the actual tunnels, on the other hand, they would be able to set traps.

In the course of his duties, Arbop naturally got to know the neighbourhood and its people. He would say a friendly hello to the man who ran the expensive corner shop and the man who sold tacos out of a van. He nodded to the surreptitious woman and her man-friend who always stood with their backs half turned, huddled over scratch-off lottery cards like somebody might try to steal their impending fortune. For their part all these people knew Arbop and saw him as a sympathetic figure, or at least a pathetic one, but understood he was not of them. He was there to patrol, to guard, to watch. They were all potential suspects in unspecified crimes that may or may not have been committed yet. Their friendly smiles had a craven quality, a touch of the way one smiles at the heavily armed, although Arbop carried no weapon. Arbop existed among them as one moves among ghosts, imagining their lives, pretending to be friends, invisibly protecting them, trying out their chairs and their shops, sampling their porridge, an invader of questionable and tentative benevolence ready to break out into battle sweats and point baleful, bony fingers.

Arbop and G ventured finally out of the neighbourhood proper and scanned the edges of the marsh itself, getting their shoes and socks quite wet for a couple of kilometres until they were startled by a man and a crocodile. The man was standing up to his waist in the bog. He moved with a gentle rhythm as if dancing in place, softly vocalising a drum beat — “daka buden *deet*, daka buden *deet*” — and stroked the crocodile’s head. The croc appeared to be grinning very widely, but then they always do.

“Cripes!” said Arbop, exaggerating his alarm to humorous effect, while G stepped back but otherwise played it cool. The man smiled at them.

“I am Bao,” he said. “This is Xuan.”

“Pleased to meet one of you,” said G.

Arbop and G considered their official options for an irregular situation with no clear legal precedent. They came to a speechless agreement to maintain a professional air of detachment for the sake of both dignity and enquiry. Without actually producing pencils and clipboards they asked checkbox questions about the reasons for the man’s presence in the swamp and the nature of his relationship with the crocodile. Everything was their business. They came to understand that what had struck them as profoundly unlikely was actually a cold, hard, warm, fuzzy fact: Bao was commonly in the swamp with his good friend the rescue crocodile Xuan.

Xuan had nearly died as a young crocodile when he was shot by a drug dealer after wandering hungry into a bad part of town. Bao had found him in a back alley and nursed him back to health by feeding him chickens and giving him love and encouragement. When Xuan was fit enough to survive on his own, Bao set him free in the river, but Xuan came straight back to his flat each day, resulting in a number of dangers and tensions. By a process of gentle persuasion they had reached a compromise: they would meet in the swamp and spend several hours a day together playing in the muck. It was all quite real and all quite normal.

The relationship had, of course, taken its toll on Bao’s marriage. His wife Cara had warned him there was too much crocodile going on, and he had replied that marriages were common enough, but this friendship with a crocodile was very likely the only one of its kind. Cara had left in a huff, freeing Bao to spend even more time in the swamp. Nobody could blame either one of them. There were no children to

consider, although the lack of children was a consideration. They had both done the right thing and chosen the positive way forward for themselves. Sometimes happy endings are sad.

“So you’ll know this quagmire fairly well, then?” asked Arbop, conscious that his job performance was being evaluated.

“Like the back of my head,” said Bao.

Arbop asked him whether he knew of any hidden routes or had seen any unusual comings or goings, avoiding trigger words like breach and perimeter. Bao said what everyone knew, which is that there were of course tunnels, he had heard rumours of threatening entities and did not doubt their existence, but that the strangest thing he had personally seen was a man testing a submersible dolphin suit. That man, however, had come from the city, and to the city he had returned. The dolphin suit enabled him to breathe under water but did not well simulate natural motion. It improved somewhat over several iterations but had never enabled him to fool or consort with any dolphins. Arbop eventually thanked the man for his help and advised him to be careful, making up a story about somebody who was friends with a crocodile only to have the beast turn on him after several years of peace. Bao smiled as if to say “ok, whatever.” G nodded, and he and Arbop went on their way along the edge of the border land.

Finally they reached the cemetery. Here was an underground of great clarity. The mausoleums might offer a way forward for the investigation. All these deaths were suspicious, in that all the sepulchral digging could provide cover for unauthorised tunnelling, but this was uncertain and there would be paperwork. Perhaps if something real could be determined, beyond illicit parties and wobbling

monuments, if a definite narrative took shape, some unearthing could be done here.

They stood for a moment and enjoyed the quiet.

“Woo woo,” said G, pantomiming the pulling of a factory whistle, indicating quitting time.

“Satisfied?” asked Arbop.

“Yep,” said G. “I got nothing on you whatsoever.”

They made their reports to the pococuranti and things went on, for a time, as normal.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Dear my brother Bodhamari whom I love,

Knocked-over garbage, vomit-covered floors, a house full of insects and doors left open. This is the legacy of the dog we love, or tried to, that little springer spaniel, the octopus, survivor of the removal of massive amounts of brain tissue, poisoning, supper, a thousand tight-fisted optic lobes of pure pudding and an irritatingly stationary machine, outside roaring. There's actually no limit to what can be taught but only reflexes are learned. Cold air, drafts of men, any number of clerks checking tickets for freak particles and exhalations foul with fish that should never have been eaten, featureless and disappearing into the tangle of night, wordless children and the sudden blindness of airmen in soiled night clothes. They play pass the parcel with no gifts, just onion skins, but nobody notices because after all it's the excitement of when the music stops, the peeling itself, and we have become inured to it, no longer babes but innocent in our cynicism. Why do I persist in this business when it must be torture to you? You know why. I'm pinching you. Can you feel it, the apophenic pinch? Is it painful?

As if one were merely another,  
Your Oliver

Arbop put the letter down and thought he would write back after baking the cake for Esther. Baking was conducive to writing. Before he could make more of a mess, however, he would first have to work the Normann; otherwise things would get out of hand. Time stopped while he scrubbed and rinsed and only started again when Effie, of all people, his wife, walked into the kitchen as he put the last plate into the dish rack.

"Don't forget," she said, and he knew what she meant and resented it.

One could not actually forget. Naturally it was tempting not to tend the Normann, because it was very easy simply not to do it, just to wash the dishes and let the Normann drip and to hell with the tending. Maybe the mould wouldn't come back. Maybe there was nothing that could stop it. Still. The Normann had not cost nothing. One ought to tend it. Arbop knew all this thanks to the nattering of his hind brain, and he didn't need any reminding from women who had in any case spent



untold weeks having disappeared because of unspecified errands only to waltz in suddenly and start issuing orders.

Before he even thought about turning around and discovering that she wasn't really there, Arbop already knew what was real and what wasn't. He turned around anyway just to be sure. Thus it was that he was looking in the direction of the door already when it was knocked, making him feel like Nostradamus Junior. The door had expanded again and could only be budged with enormous effort. When finally he coerced it open he expected anything, which turned out to be Yaro next to Esther.

"It's Esther," said Yaro.

"I haven't forgotten," said Arbop, still holding the door by the knob like a shield.

"So is it done?" said Esther.

"I'm doing it now."

Esther gave Arbop the look she always gave everyone, daring them to prove they weren't like everybody else.

"I smell something," she said, "but it's not cake."

"Do you want to come in? I'll teach you how to make it."

"She doesn't want to learn that," said Yaro.

"You bake it," said Esther.

"He'll bake it," said Yaro.

"I said I would," said Arbop.

They went away and Arbop moodily baked the cake. He used the time to think up how to respond to his brother, or whether to ignore him again, or whether to intend to respond only to delay until he had effectively ignored him again. But his thoughts just went around in a loop.

Two hours later Arbop delivered his cake. He explained the situation to Esther's guard, a bored and suspicious gum-chewing teenager called Deke.

"It's that guy Arbop," drawled Deke through the shouty hole.

Esther opened the door a crack and peered out.

"You wore clothes right?" she said.

"Yes," said Arbop, offering a conspiratorial eye-roll to Deke, who didn't care.

"I don't mean to keep bringing it up."

"Esther," said Arbop, avoiding the guard's gaze.

He was invited in and he accepted even though the winds were howling in his head, the loose shutters banging against his skull: *Don't go in the house*. But that was more or less a state of permanent internal emergency. If he listened to it, he'd never do anything.

"By the way," said Esther, walking into her living room, her back to Arbop.

"I know about your brother. Your wife, too. You're a lonely guy."

"Yes. Of course."

"I'm not coming on to you, I'm seventy-two," said Esther. "But I gotta tell you, my husband? He was a real piece of work."

"Is he dead?"

Why not? She had started it. The room looked and smelled like fifty years of cigarette smoke, a smell that Arbop still half liked, even as it disgusted him. Esther took a sip out of a glass of sherry.

"Eleven years ago. Twelve years, eleven, who cares. Before you showed up."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm on the sherry. You want some?"

“No thanks.”

Esther poured him some sherry and he took it.

“That guy, let me tell you, I’d send him out to buy an apple. I used to care about apples. I like them tart.”

“Me too,” said Arbop, knocking his sherry back in one go from inexperience.

Esther filled his glass.

“You sip it,” she said. “You don’t gulp it down like a hyena.”

“Oh,” said Arbop, embarrassed.

“That’s why it’s in a little tiny glass.”

“OK.”

“It’s not a giant pint glass is it?”

“No.”

“It’s not beer. Anyway. It has to be crisp. Tart! And what does he come back with?”

“Some ridiculous soft, mealy...”

“No, what, he’s stupid? No he’d get the right apple, but he’d get it wrong, with a gouge in it. Huge gouge.”

“So...”

“What do you do when you shop for apples, just grab one without looking?”

“Hell no. I check ’em out, give ’em the once over.”

“Yeah. Because you gotta eat it, right?”

“Right.”

“Well Lenny picks out the one with the gouge. Like somebody jibbed it with a shovel. With potatoes, OK, but apples?”

“So did you ever ask him, I mean what did he say?”

“Sure I asked him. I go ‘Lenny.’ He goes ‘what?’”

“That’s it?”

“What else?”

“So you’re right,” ventured Arbop. “The man was a piece of work.”

“Do you think I killed him?”

“Two seconds ago, no. Did you?”

“Who would care?”

“What about you? You might care.”

“How would that help me?”

“You might care if they threw you in jail.”

“What, for murder?”

“Sure. It’s a crime.”

“Pffft.”

“I’ve killed things.”

A moment of silence. The sound of Esther sipping.

“But,” continued Arbop, “when I do it I feel terrible about it. I actually never do it any more. I leave them alone, or if there’s too many, I just put some outside.”

Arbop nodded at Esther, smiling. It was nice, talking to Esther. You could say anything.

“I did kill him,” she said at last. “He wanted me to. He was dying too slow.”

“He was ill.”

Esther nodded.

“That must have been hard,” said Arbop.

“Well, you didn’t see him.”

Esther kept her eyeballs wide open and still so they'd stay dry. So did Arbop. They sat there with dried wide eyes and took small sips of sherry for a good two minutes.

"There have been other men since then," said Esther. "Not a lot. Two. Actually one."

"Well," said Arbop, trying to pull everything back from the maudlin. "I hope you didn't get any pubic hairs on him."

"Me too."

"My parents died," said Arbop.

Esther nodded.

"Together," said Arbop. "They were lousy drivers."

Esther kept nodding.

"I don't believe in the afterlife," said Arbop. "It was a long time ago and my brother still doesn't know about it. He left. I get letters. I want to respond. There's always that feeling that we should be communicating, that there should be things to say. But."

"But," agreed Esther. "You don't have words. But you miss him."

Arbop just nodded, and held his eyes open for dryness again.

"And your wife," added Esther.

"All right already," said Arbop, straightening up in his chair.

It was nearly time for the party. Arbop only meant to blow up a few balloons and take off before the children arrived, but he ended up staying for the party and taking charge of musical statues and snack distribution. The real fun began when the charismatic magician arrived in all black: The Great Malini. The children gathered round in rapt attention around him. He began by reading vibrations.

“This place,” Malini intoned, inhaling deeply, “is full of death.”

The children laughed so hard, it was just as if they had all gone mad from needing a poo. The magician smiled.

“Even the spoons aren’t safe,” he continued. “Are there any spoons on the premises?”

There were. Esther got some out of a drawer, and she held them aloft as she came waddling back into the room from the kitchen. By the time she reached where the children were sitting, the spoons had all drooped like old flowers. The children were in hysterics. Esther laughed too, while yelping in alarm, and she dropped the bent spoons onto the floor. The magician stared at them intently, and as everyone watched, the spoons continued to curl up, and finally they liquefied into a single pool of silvery shimmering liquid. One of the children reached out as if to stick a finger into the silver fluid.

“Don’t touch it!” said The Great Malini, and then, softening, added: “It’s quite hot!”

He swiftly moved his hands together in a figure eight, and he was suddenly holding a pair of welder’s gloves, which he put on. Scooping up the liquid, he cupped his hands, brought them to his mouth, and blew three times between his thumbs. The Great Malini gracefully extended his hands, which now held a perfect silver sphere. He handed the sphere to Arbop. Arbop handed it to the nearest child, who accepted it with a sense of awe.

“Those were nice spoons,” said The Great Malini. “I do apologise. Can I have more?”

“No,” said Esther, and the children rolled on the floor once more. Arbop laughed out loud as well.

The magician pulled out a deck of cards and did some impressive shuffling, even sending the cards in an arc from one hand to the other across three feet of open air. He spread the cards into a fan and offered them to a girl of no more than seven, beseeching her to pick one, cautioning her to be careful. Whenever she got near to any card, Malini would pull them back in horror.

“No!” he would say. “Not that one!”

The children laughed. They operated without a mature sense of foreboding. The girl was shy, but she warmed up to her role. After seeing the cards pulled away at the last minute three times, she became more aggressive. When the magician held out the cards this time, she was quick and decisive. She snatched a card before he could move, unless of course he could move and chose not to.

“No!” he said again, affecting horror and looking around as if afraid. “Oh dear, no.”

He looked up. The ceiling seemed really to crack open, so real was the illusion. There was a loud rumbling and plaster powder seemed to rain down, then large chunks of concrete. By all appearances it was getting dangerous in there. The place was caving in. Soon Esther and all the children were mostly buried in rubble from what looked like a destroyed building. Only an arm here, a head there, a foot sticking out, everything covered in white powder and debris. Arbop made eye contact with The Great Malini, whose steady gaze gave no indication of whether Arbop ought to laugh or be terrified. By some kind of aural mystification, everything seemed utterly silent now as well, as silent as a photograph. Arbop tried to speak and couldn't.

And then everything was back to normal! The children looked at each other and touched their own bodies, laughing and amazed. Esther was very relieved to

look around and find not only was everybody alive, but there was no horrendous mess to clean up. Her spoons, however, were still all in a sphere. Arbop kept his eyes on The Great Malini, who permitted himself a sad half-smile and a tip of his hat while everyone clapped enthusiastically. After that, Malini was gone, and nobody even saw him leave.

“Now *that*,” said Arbop, putting his hand on Esther’s shoulder, “was a great party.”

When he got home, he found that the roof of the tiny representation of his own building on his bedroom floor was badly damaged. A spider walked quickly away from it, as if whistling.



## CHAPTER NINE

Arbop scolded the spider affectionately with genuine hostility and fixed the roof. It was nothing a bit of glue, an ice cream stick, and a lick of paint couldn't handle. He heard things, however, as he worked, tiny things, coming from the Civic Centre. He stuck his ear as close as he could to the main entrance. Voices. Music. Laughter. It was dizzying and the world was too big, overwhelming, beyond control, and he had gotten too close to the big double doors and then he was inside.

He staggered down the thumping hallway of the Civic Centre basement and easily found the party, which raged on, as apparently always. He paid his tenner with élan and no words, sharing a nod of mutual understanding with the Asian woman who manned the door. Effie was there, laughing it up with Oliver, the two of them both happy to see him, delight in their eyes at the moment of recognition, beckoning him over with literal open arms. Arbop gave Effie an affectionate kiss right on the lips just as it had been in the old days before. He hugged his brother Oliver and gave him a playful punch in the stomach, not hard, just like shadow boxing, to make him smile. Success. It was like before the war, before all wars, before war. It was before babies and cars, pre-industrial and primordial, *homo pristinus*, and before anyone had any place to go and there was no reason to leave.

"You're always late!" exclaimed Effie. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Do you miss me?" asked Arbop, and Oliver dissolved in cosmic brotherly laughter without malice, although it had been a serious question.

"Let's dance!" said Effie, pulling Arbop by his two hands into the centre of the room, and the music obliged by getting louder, so loud that talking was impossible. You'd have to shout as loud as you could right into a person's ear, and you still wouldn't be able to hear yourself, yet it would hurt the other person's

membranes and no communication would take place other than an exchange of unpleasant impressions. Everyone knew it, nobody tried. Friends among friends. A time before trouble, a time without pain. Arbop wanted something else. Some wine. Anything. Something. He looked around. Where was the bar?

Arbop saw Oliver over with the two strange men with keratin faces and now they had a third one with them. They were multiplying, and Oliver was speaking to them intently, all business. He even jabbed his forefinger into the shoulder of one of them, twice, to make whatever point he was making more forcefully. Oliver looked up and saw Arbop watching them and made a mysterious half smile before stepping back and losing himself in the crowd. Arbop made as if to tip his imaginary cap to the Keratin Boys, and the three of them received the gesture as intended and tipped their real caps back. One presumes it was meant as a friendly gesture, as Arbop's had been, but from it emanated a certain menace. Arbop felt it and got a touch of the old fight or flight, ignore or confront. He decided to approach them and dispel the clouds. They decided to stand stock still and watch him approach.

"May I make a confession?" was Arbop's opening line, and the three of them tilted their pale flat faces slightly in the same direction in unison, making the same quizzical smile with their difficult-to-discern little lips, not at all unfriendly, nor unthreatening. "I don't know which two of you it was, but when I first saw you here, I thought you seemed very strange. But now I have come to think of you, all of you, quite fondly. There's something endearing about you. It has nothing to do with my brother. Now you know everything. My name is Arbop. May I buy you gentlemen a drink?"

The triumvirate turned their flatnesses towards each other and there began a great murmuring. Nothing like individual words could be made out, nothing even

like language. What came out of them seemed like the noise of a crowd through a wall. Low continuous rumbling bubbles punctuated by distant laughter at no audible joke, even the clinking of glasses and the odd scraping of a chair, the sound of a gasped prayer, the tone of an argument about sports, this was how they spoke. They occasionally flicked against each other quickly to add a whiffing noise to the aural texture. Suddenly one of their hard faces lurched forward and was inches from Arbop's, the smell of it overwhelming, like an old sandal that had been worn on a hot day without socks, a mouth opened up and, as if the soundtrack had gone out of sync, a half second too late three voices said a guttural "no!" and Arbop had his answer.

Arbop stepped back, afraid, and the men grabbed at him — Arbop thought they were smiling, they had ugly smiles — and they began pulling him towards a door out of the ballroom in the dark. He fought. Where was Oliver? Where was Effie? Inauspiciously, they were no longer around. They had chosen a fine time to dissipate. The three strangers seemed to have more than six hands, or maybe just the six, but certainly too many fingers. Arbop wished he knew something about wrestling or aikido, anything that would let him get hold of some part of one of these arms and with one deft motion leave these spidery snatch-grabbers in a comical knot. As it was, he wriggled ineffectively and felt more and more slippery yet more and more stuck as they dragged him down hallways and around corners and through doorways and into new hallways. They pulled him into the lift and they went up out of the basement into the main concourse, struggling and grabbing and clawing all the while. They rolled past the citizenship office and the newsagent's, on past the pretzel hub and the barber and the place where they weigh things, and right into Arbop's own doctor's office.

As they dragged they began also clubbing him with stubby plumpers as he pleaded for clarification. If only they wanted something, if only they had a question, if only there were a way forward via reason and negotiation. Arbop's terror began to subside when he realised that he was not being hurt, he could withstand the blows, no damage was being done to his body. This was an assault on his feelings. His sense of personal security and integrity, the sense of where inside became outside was being terrorised. He needed to get off the defensive, take the fight to them, stop being such a victim, stop being afraid, stop assuming they were invincible and had an immutable upper hand, throw them off and choose to reign supreme. Still the dragging went on and on, clubbing and dragging and fingers and the noise of their crowd-noise gasping noise-language, as Arbop struggled to gain some purchase on anything, a door handle, a leg, a sleeve, as he slid down one hallway after another. Of course you realise this means war, boys, this is war!

Finally he caught one of them with a blow to the stomach, not like the playful shots he threw at Oliver, a real punch, which landed solidly and winded the bastard, who staggered backwards. Now he had an arm in his hands and could get to his feet. He spun and let go of the arm, sending an oppressor flying. Now he was standing fully and in a defensive posture, only it was very dark and they had retreated to shadows. Arbop turned this way and that, warily, jabbing into the darkness like a mad boxer fighting a deadly mist. He got bum rushed by the Keratin Mob and went down again, hard.

There was a scramble. To an outside observer it would likely have appeared as a cartoon cloud with occasional limbs. They had made a terrible mess in the doctor's office and Arbop successfully directed the action back out into the main hallway. Soon they were in the back reaches, near the access to the parking lots.

Either Arbop pushed open the emergency exit door, or he was pushed through it. It matters not. Arbop went tumbling out into the blinding sunlight of a blistering hot and presumably hostile environment. There was no more pummelling, no more dragging. He was alone and it was quiet. Too quiet.

He staggered down a dusty street and ducked into a bright concrete alleyway with shadow holes. He didn't know where to go, so he just inched himself along the wall, pressing himself as flat as possible, imagining what it would be like to be truly two-dimensional, so people could walk by him and assume he was graffiti. The whole thing was starting to feel like an imaginary soup so he crawled inside a shadow. It was yet again some kind of tunnel so he whispered *Birdie, Birdie* as he crawled. It seemed like a stupid thing to do but once he started he couldn't stop.

It was cool and pleasant in the tunnel and Arbop felt like he had an appointment to keep, which automatically made him want to cancel it, but still he crawled towards it. Maybe the appointment would cancel itself. Never mind. Arbop began to adopt a jaunty attitude towards his appointment, deciding it would all be a great laugh, partly because he didn't think it really existed. Gradually he became aware of a certain murmuring that surrounded him. He paused and willed all his blood to go to his ears and he was able to get a direction on the murmur. It was coming from ahead of him. *Here, Birdie Birdie*. If Birdie were in there it would be the end of Arbop but he felt happy and almost burst out laughing.

They must have heard him coming because suddenly one of them lit a match. Arbop saw five men, faces lit up by the light of that single match, all of them looking at him with amused expressions. None of them was the least bit tense. Although they were wearing hardhats, they had the look of gentlemen and were drinking cups of tea. What a thoughtful group of fellows! The man who had lit the

match used it to light two candles, so the light became much better. Arbop could see their thermoses. They were workmen.

“Excuse us,” said the candle lighter, and cleared his throat. “We enjoy the darkness.”

“Startle you?” said another, looking highly amused.

“Who are you guys?” asked Arbop.

“Who do we look like?” asked one of them back, in a gentle tone of voice that suggested he was inviting any sort of well-considered response.

“Builders?” guessed Arbop. “Building this tunnel?”

They all began nodding. Some of them sipped their tea.

“Aye,” said one. “Tunnel work! That’s real work!”

The man introduced himself as Dakka Budendeet and said he was the foreman. He had the look of a foreman. One of his ears was twice the size of his other one, he had one slender eyebrow and one bushy one, and he had a scar that ran diagonally across his entire face, from the top left of his hair line, traversing his nose and mouth, to the lower right of his jaw. He would have been frightening were it not for his kindly eyes. Arbop and the others introduced themselves. Hands were shaken.

“For workmen, if I may say,” ventured Arbop, “you seem at the same time so bohemian.”

“This is the Bohemian Crater,” nodded the one called Ralph.

“Here’s your bohemian,” said Dakka, pointing to the one called Antonin.

“You’ve spotted his book!”

Actually he had not. Arbop squinted towards the man and there was perhaps a book by his side.

“Well, we’re having a break,” said Antonin, as if in explanation.

“We were just discussing,” said Dakka Budendeet, “if Rimbaud had been born in this era, would he or would he not have been a rock star instead of a poet, and, if so, which one would he be most like?”

Arbop had a few ideas on that subject but he lacked the confidence to express them. He contributed nothing to the conversation.

“It’s hot outside,” said Ralph. “Would you like some red wine?”

“Wine!” said Arbop. “That’s just what I believe I was after. I thought you were having tea.”

“Is it tea time?” asked the one called Tuji, who was not a man but a woman.

“No no,” assured Ralph.

Arbop told the truth, and wanted to tell them the story of how he had set out for some wine or something even stronger, but he became confused; he could not remember the story.

“Cheap merlot,” continued Dakka apologetically, pouring some into a teacup for Arbop. “But not the very cheapest. I tend to buy the second-cheapest bottle. I feel certain that a marketing specialist would tell you that my behaviour was typical of my class. There must be millions like me. Every once in a while? Third cheapest.”

Arbop drank the wine and thanked the workers for their kindness. The group of them sat in lionhearted silence for a time.

“You haven’t told us what brings you here,” said Dakka quite amiably.

“I’m not sure myself!” said Arbop, eliciting warm laughter.

Arbop grew serious. He told them about Birdie and how long he had been looking, how unnerving it was, how he couldn’t stand the quiet. There were tunnels

everywhere and it was insane and it was impossible to map them. He said he envied their skills and their conversations. He spoke of cultivating a more violent attitude and determining what to do with it.

“To be honest,” said Arbop, “I feel like I have sabotage on my mind. Is that too honest?”

“Not at all,” came the reassuring reply.

“It’s not a plan or anything,” mused Arbop aloud. “It’s really just a feeling.”

“I’ve had that,” said Dakka Budendeet, and they all nodded.

“I always want to blow shit up,” said Tuji, eliciting quiet laughter. “That’s why I like tunnel work.”

There followed another agreeable period of virile silence and sipping. If there had been a camp fire with embers instead of just candles, someone would certainly have stirred the embers with a stick.

“It has been of very great interest to meet you,” Arbop said finally. “I’d tip my helmet to you but there are so many straps.”

It was true that Arbop suddenly had a helmet on his head and was otherwise dressed like a soldier. The men laughed and they all shared a warm feeling in the cold tunnel, although none of them liked soldiers.

“Be careful,” said Ralph. “There’s a war on, you know.”

Everyone laughed, loudly this time.

Arbop excused himself and asked whether there was another way out. The workers said there was, but he’d have to clamber over them because there was no room for them to get out of the way. Arbop clambered, so as not to return to the same point from which he had started. Forward, always forward. He crawled his way along through another branch of the tunnel, trying to remember to remain slow



and careful despite the moment of respite and conviviality. Or had he imagined that?

He emerged into a day of even brighter sunlight, even harsher shadows.

*Birdie, Birdie.*

## CHAPTER TEN

Arbop woke up dishevelled and missing another toe. This time it had happened to his other foot. He didn't notice it immediately, but only when he was in the shower, where the sight of it startled him greatly. He had convinced himself that his toe troubles were over, that it was all a big non-event, that he could ignore it and proceed as if nothing of interest had ever happened to his feet. At first he maintained the hope that the toe was merely obscured by soap bubbles. After all, he had just finished shampooing, and the bubbling was considerable. When he rinsed away the confusion, however, his heart sank and controlled panic set in. The toe was clearly gone. He fell to his knees in the tub and began scrabbling pointlessly at the drain, thinking perhaps it had gone down, or might still be rescued. This was nonsense. The toe had not come off in the shower, and would not fit down the drain. He would have to go visit Dr Bronofsky again at the Civic Centre. Self-limiting apoptosis indeed. This could be malpractice. Malfeasance. There could be legal repercussions here, except for how fondly he regarded the good doctor despite her obvious gross incompetence. There was good news of course, which could be found in the balancing effect of a second foot being afflicted. Nobody who imagined three toes gone on one foot could be pleased at the prospect.

Just look at the state of the tiny city, thought Arbop, but in his own words. There was, to be sure, nothing to see. He had not built the urban innards, only the staid exteriors, but one could smell the trouble within. The Civic Centre seemed putrid and wrecked, although it was hard to say why. Even a detailed illustration done to medical perfection would not have shown anything amiss. Yet there existed a muted odour and slender emanations that were starkly obvious to the truly sensitive. A sharp rapping on his real door shocked him out of his dreams.

“Another one,” came the shout. “Very suspicious.”

Yaro.

Arbop went to the door, which was in its expanded and difficult-to-budge state, but he struggled it open and accepted the letter, which of course was once again from his brother. He sat on the edge of his bed to read it, in case anything untoward happened in his city, in case the spiders tried any jokes.

Dear my brother Bodhamari whom I love:

Myth is complicated by identity and vice versa. The symbolic order vacillates, distorted by an invisible frame. Hypodermic brooding on habits and opinions, cool like the street, but what is offered is not Italy. The violence of tone elicits sympathy, the belief in munitions, a disquieting synthesis of photographs, pseudo-patients and breathing behaviour collectively restructure in glaring, humourless contrast an uncontrollable mirth. With only the situated void as inscription, I cling to my sufferings as to paradox, like a prisoner, in rhetorical unity. I come not to liberate, but as health, as thirst, as degradation, and in vegetable ruin. But I come. In modes of excess and frustrated meaning, I become your irretrievable lapses.

Unbearably,  
Your Oliver

Arbop crumpled up the letter immediately and hurled it towards his front window. Yaro would have heard the soft yet firm bounce of crumpled paper ball off glass. When he stood up to get dressed he felt with his bare feet, destabilised as they were by what was not there, a crunchiness, as if the floor were cracking, starting to give way, coming apart beneath him. How much would that cost to get fixed, he wondered. Other people's floors didn't crumble apart all of a sudden out of the blue, Arbop felt certain of that. Entropy. Life was getting worse and worse all the time. Well, to hell with this siege mentality, thought Arbop, trying to take the bull by the horns, I'm going to the doctor's. He requested and received the necessary passes from Yaro after the usual needling.

“You should just try toe nails,” for example. Or: “At least it’s not your fingers or you wouldn’t be able to query the lieutenant!”

On the train into the heart of the real city, Arbop found his own reflection in the parallel transparency on the glass buildings across the way. In order to be certain he had the right silhouette, he waved, as if at himself, and saw himself wave back. Nobody notices things like people sitting on a train waving at nobody, but one feels self-conscious nonetheless. The more unlikely your behaviour, the more energetically everyone will edit you out. Any rupture you cause will reseal. How many supplicants had wandered like ghosts through the subway cars, beseeching in various tones of constrained resentment and going unnoticed? “I don’t sing, I don’t dance, I’m not selling any candy.” “Ladies and gentlemen good afternoon I am sorry to disturb you.” “This is a rupture, my friends, reseal, ignore, look down.”

Once in a while the bubble pops, on the other hand, properly pops, and then it pops completely and behaviours change. When the one with no legs came through, pulling and dragging himself along with the strength of his arms alone, pushing his rattling cup forward ahead of him, a bedraggled, filthy, blackened, wordless stump of a man swaddled in rags and horrors, pockets emptied quickly; he cleaned up. He made no pitch. He was the pitch. He just shuffle-dragged along, arms forward, rump thump, repeat, with deliberate speed, dispensing the shudders. People paid for the right to forget. Then they could reseal the bubble but it reverberates for some time. There’s nothing to be done about that, but it’s only worse if you don’t pay.

With no intentional disrespect, Arbop checked behind the man for a slime trail.

When Arbop arrived at Dr Bronofsky’s office, it was all in a shambles. Workmen were there, putting things back in order in a workmanlike fashion. Dr

Bronofsky's eyes settled on Arbop with the tested patience of an experienced parent. She ran her professional fingers through her slightly tousled brown hair and looked tired, but not perturbed.

"Has this happened in real life?" asked Arbop, not wanting to know. "What I mean is, what on earth has happened here?"

The doctor explained it all in clinical terms. There had been a night breach and some shenanigans. One or more people had run amok. Arbop tried to shift into professional mode himself. As a CPP man, this kind of thing was right in his wheelhouse.

"Any clues?" he asked, not wanting to know that either. "Definite indications of full-sized, actual causality?"

There were clues. Whoever trashed the office had left a pair of heavily worn trainers, a blue cagoule with a broken zipper, and some mittens. All of them Arbop's. The mittens he hadn't seen in two years. Arbop smiled awkwardly.

"These are of course all my own things," he said. "As you must know."

"Interesting," said Dr Bronofsky. "Come in. We'll find a place to sit down."

A wide-ranging conversation followed in which the doctor disclaimed any thoroughgoing knowledge of Arbop's things and seemed more interested in the letters from Oliver than anything else, including Arbop's newly missing toe. It was only after some quite strenuous insistence that she agreed to take a look at his feet at all. When she did, she tossed off some noncommittal hand-waving about recognition of conserved pathogen motifs by phagocytic mannose receptors following relatively nonspecific opsonisation in the actin cytoskeleton.

"What you need more than anything," she concluded, "is rest."

Well that was a nice prescription, hard to reject, although Arbop had been hoping for something more along the lines of a magic ointment or some minor, almost apocryphal surgery that could be performed in-office with only local anaesthetic. While he achieved less than one hundred percent confidence in the doctor's opinion, he began the process of talking himself into accepting it, the process of quieting objections and queries from the mental backbench. He couldn't help himself; he found her so charming, her manner so reassuring.

Arbop was also gratified that, despite his owning up to apparent personal involvement with the clues at the scene of the crime, she steadfastly refused to assign him any measure of blame for the unfortunate events. Possibly this was because it was improbable that a CPP man would go breaking into doctor's offices in the middle of the night and wreaking pointless havoc, particularly in a debilitated state of partial toelessness. It would be one thing if he had been deranged, unglued, gone bananas, but having seen him perfectly composed the following morning, surely she relegated that possibility to a vanishingly low probability. In any case, had she given any sign of suspecting it? Was rest only for the insane?

An additional, supporting possibility was that she was unpersuaded by his claims of ownership of the articles of clothing left behind. One becomes expert in the particular defects and effluvia of one's personal items, so that one's own blue cagoule is rendered uniquely distinct from all others, whereas to anyone else they all appear so much alike as to be effectively identical. The articles themselves were generic enough. Arbop himself might have been mistaken. The possibility did occur to him, he even jumped at it. It was very likely the doctor's automatic assumption. Or of course he had left the clothing there at an earlier time, for whatever oddly normal human reason, and the items had gotten stuffed into some cupboard to be

forgotten until tipped out by the marauding intruders. Probably the good doctor went so far as to admire Arbop's courage in stepping forward with a potentially incriminating admission. The very integrity thereby demonstrated obviated at once the possibility of his guilt.

The responsible thing to do would be to accept the doctor's judgement and, if possible, to follow her sound advice to rest up. The tenuous vestimentary evidence was inconclusive at best, attesting ultimately to nothing more than the mind's uncanny ability to make inappropriate connections among disparate dots and impose patterns where none exist. These were just the trivial and amusing side effects of an evolutionary adaptation quite useful in survival contexts when a whole snake must be inferred, for example, from only a tail. The presence at the scene of the crime of Arbop's clothing — if indeed it even was Arbop's clothing — was merely the Pierogi Jesus of the disquisitive arts.

What was more notable here was the doctor's curiosity about Oliver's latest letter, which Arbop had only mentioned in an off-hand way, a bit of small talk as they cleared out a space to sit down amidst the chaos of the upturned office. She took nothing for granted, asking how Arbop knew the letters were real, first of all, and second of all how he knew they were really from his brother. Arbop liked her meticulous mind and the shape of her ears. How indeed could he know whether the letters or indeed the doctor's office or indeed doctors were real?

"I think," he said, trying to affect a twinkle in his eye, "we'll just have to proceed on the assumption that this is all real. There is little to lose." He rapped on a side table to emphasise his point about apparent solidity while Dr Bronofsky took notes. Always and ever so meticulous. A real professional.

The more Arbop thought about it, the more it dawned on him that the doctor may have been hinting at a larger point without wanting to go so far as to offend him with the implication: namely, that Oliver himself might be implicated in all of this directly. Old Oliver was persistently turning up in the most unlikely places only to remain elusive in the cold light of day. It was always a matter of haphazard guesswork trying to interpret his letters, with only uncertain and unreliable results as the best-case reward, but didn't his last missive in particular allude to an intention to approach and enter the city — "I come" — and would that not entail a transgression of the perimeter and might that not bring with it barbarism? The mischievous hand of his brother could be seen or justifiably imagined in so much of the nonsense that had been occurring recently. It could certainly go some distance towards explaining the conundrum of Arbop's de- and re-materialising clothing. Had he not been consorting with the Keratin Mob, if only in tiny and oneiric ways?

But it was even worse than that. His brother had never liked the city. He overtly bore it animosity, blaming its fundamental organisation as literally and representatively responsible for the sense of anomie that made irony impotent.

What do you have against the city? Arbop had once asked.

"It does nothing for me," Oliver had said.

"I have *had* it!" Arbop imagined the city replying. "I do and do and *do* for you people and this is the thanks I get!"

Ask not what your city does for you, but what you do for your city, Arbop had responded. That, he now reflected, was one of the differences between himself and his brother. Arbop did and did and did for the city and asked for no thanks. He patrolled its streets. He protected its perimeter. He lovingly recreated it in miniature on his bedroom floor when he knew full well it was just the sort of obsessive



behaviour that defied poetry and drove his wife around the bend because of how it served as a way to hide from all the things he would never talk about.

He was up to something, that Oliver, he and those Keratin Boys, they were planning something and they were trying to implicate him.

He decided to report his suspicions to G right after his patrol. After some misgivings based on both doubt and familial responsibility, he blurted it all out in an overly excited stream of poorly organised babble. Arbop suddenly felt embarrassed; he hadn't even done a Grimsby check. He had said it too hysterically, like he was a character in a 1950s situation comedy and Desi Arnaz or Audrey Meadows was about to say something that crystallised his ridiculousness.

"Oh this is living all right, Arbop," for example. "Har-de-har-har. You should have thought of that before you married her. This is all your fault, you know. If you'd never left Cuba, we never would've ended up in Switzerland in the first place."

"Siu Bak-Choi," said G instead.

"Hm?"

"Little Cabbage. You never know who's doing what. That's just the way it is."

"What's this now?"

"Hong Kong movie. Little Cabbage got the ten tortures of the Qing Dynasty as a way of making her confess. Only she didn't murder anybody. Remind you of anything? Did anybody investigate? No. Why go looking for a story you've already got? It was a comedy, by the way, about rape and torture. Watching it alone I never knew it was funny. I just felt dirty. You see it with other people, they're dying laughing. It's a comedy. What a relief!"

“But us, we investigate our murders.”

“We *solve* them. We don’t need your brother, Bop-a-Loo Wop. Your head’s spinning. Slow down. You lose your head Bobby Kennedy’s going to find it and put it in a jar.”

Arbop thought he saw the wallpaper ripple. Grimsby.

*The Perimeter’s a bubble,*

*Sacrosanct and real.*

*We shall protect its contours, that’s the deal.*

“You should go in for the therapy,” recommended G. “Why not? It’s a benefit, we’re entitled to that, take it.”

Grimsby stopped at a desk in the background, pretending not to listen. He picked up a stack of paper and straightened it out by holding it vertically and tapping it several times against the desktop. He was whistling. People don’t whistle.

Arbop agreed with G. He should have the therapy. He went down to the therapy room where the technicians put some electrodes on his testicles and painfully shocked him several times before pouring water on his face until he thought he was drowning. Then they put him in the tank. He felt enormously invigorated.

The tank was just what it sounded like, a big plexiglass cube full of water with eighteen inches of air at the top, and slotted holes for air and sound to pass through. You got a breathing tube and some goggles. The idea was to float there for a long time until they let you out. The therapeutic element came from the fact that an anonymous technician decided when it was time to come out. You didn’t get a vote. There was no point in counting down the minutes, because you couldn’t know what you were counting down to. You could try counting forward out of some kind of

accounting impulse, but sooner or later you just floated, timelessly, one with infinity.

Arbop had been in the tank for many hours when G decided to go check on him, bring him a present, liven things up. G approached the tank and stood quietly and waited for Arbop to notice him, but by then Arbop was off in his own weightless little eternity. It took ages for him to notice G and when he did, he paused briefly in his floating to look him in the eyes. Then he just paddled off in the other direction and floated with his back to his colleague. It could be that Arbop had gotten into a quasi-hypnotic state in which he could not recognise his fellow human beings, or that he did not wish to be disturbed, or that he had developed resentments against those who were outside of the tank. He might even have become afraid of what lay beyond the placid waters, initially so alien and punishing, but by now home, and his.

“I brought you some fish!” shouted G.

G had brought an assortment of fish that he believed would look good in the big tank and behave well together. Australian rainbow fish, South American cichlids, fancy gold, angel fish, and clown loaches. He had remembered to bring fish food.

There was no sign of acknowledgement from Arbop. G understood: Arbop was in deep, far gone, half doolally. G knew what to do: he began pushing the fish through the slots. One at a time he watched them plop and swim. Each time he shot a glance at old Arbop to see whether he would notice that he had company, that somebody was doing something for him, that anything had changed.

Soon all the fish were in and swimming. It was only a matter of time. G would wait. There were, after all, chairs in the visitor area, and G knew many tunes

he could hum. Soon enough, Arbop did notice his new companions. He stared for a while at the fish and engaged in some primitive interactions with them. The fish took to the water as naturally as one would expect and were not afraid of Arbop, and he gave them no reason to learn fear. They stoically bore his finger pokes in their noses and wiggled on their little ways around their new home for their own reasons. Finally Arbop bobbed to the surface, took the tube out of his mouth, removed his goggles, shook his hair around, and located G in his chair.

“You put these in here?” he shouted.

“Happy birthday!” smiled G. “Merry Christmas!”

“They’re gonna poop!” shouted Arbop.

“You’re welcome,” said G.

“This is not a fish tank! It’s going to get cloudy in here, just wait. Cloudier and cloudier. Man!”

“Nah,” said G. “There’s a filter.”

“Where?”

“If there was no filter,” said G, “it would’ve been cloudy a long time ago.”

“From what?”

“You, for one.”

“I’m holding it in!”

“You’re not the first guy ever to be put in the tank,” said G. “If there was no filter, wouldn’t it be cloudy from a thousand other guys? You think they empty it every night and refill it fresh? Get real!”

Arbop glared silently at G for a few pointed seconds before theatrically sliding his goggles back down, re-inserting his air tube, and diving. Just as theatrically, G turned and left. Arbop liked the fish. They both knew it. It was great

floating around in there with real fish. Why had he given G a hard time? So he'd gotten cranky. He'd make it up to him. One time when they were little, Oliver woke him up with a birthday card and Arbop had taken one look and said he didn't like it. Oliver cried. Oliver, the big brother, ran out of the room crying. Why had Arbop done it? He did like the card. What he didn't like was the expectation of him liking it. What a stupid moment. A stupid impulse to be contrary. Oliver quickly shrugged it off but Arbop still carried it, to this day it moved him with sorrow. I'm sorry my brother, forgive me, I beg you. I loved your card and I loved you. Let's go back and do it again, this time I won't be stupid. Thank you! You made this? It's so beautiful!

Two hours later, the technician came in. Her name was Rosie. She was Salvadoran, a good person, and wore her long hair tied back.

"Everybody out of the pool!" she said, warmly, with humour, and ended Arbop's therapy session. It had been a challenging stirring up of feelings. Arbop had realised by then that his brother was already in the city. It was obvious. He was there, he had breached, he had come to find him. The letters were taunts. Oliver had left and Arbop was still here. What was Arbop still doing here? That was surely what Oliver was demanding to know. Arbop would not simply wait. He would go home, plan, and take the game to him.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

How had Oliver entered the city? There was the legal way, which would be very unlikely for a man of Oliver's reputation. In order to obtain papers he would most likely have needed to invoke his relationship with Arbop, and Arbop would have been called upon to verify details and to assume responsibility. Needless to say that had not happened. And if it had happened, Oliver would more likely have dragged Arbop into trouble than been dragged out of it himself. But if he hadn't entered legally, then he must have breached the perimeter, which wasn't possible.

As much as he might have theoretically liked to see his own brother, this incursion was also an affront to Arbop and his professional competency, to say nothing of his faith and sense of reality. A breach of one perimeter is a breach of all perimeters.

Arbop got the blocks out and started building. He had focused too much of his effort lately on the Civic Centre area and Circle Square; he had neglected the tiny toy perimeter. He of all people. It was time for that to change. He would lay it out in excruciating detail and come to know every inch of it even more intimately. If there were any vulnerabilities that had escaped his notice so far, he would find them and devise strategies to deal with them. A sudden knock on the door caused Arbop to gasp audibly, which in turn made him feel absurd. Was it him? Had the time come already?

If he was here, Yaro would have him already. It would be over. Arbop had almost forgotten that it was not merely a personal matter between himself and his brother; the city had an interest in it as well. His brother would be on lists. There would be a period of detention and quite a few questions, at a minimum. It was even

possible they would want to make an example of him. It would be best if Arbop found him first.

It couldn't be him. A man who could breach the perimeter would never knock on a guarded door — unless he was in disguise. It was possible. There could be a moustachioed delivery boy or a nun or a cowboy waiting outside with Oliver inside. Arbop approached the door cautiously.

“Yes?” he said.

“It's just me,” said Yaro.

“Can I help you?”

“What are you thinking about?”

“Sorry?”

“I'm just wondering.”

Silence. This was nice, in its own way. Couldn't Yaro be lonely too? Individual people, doing their jobs in an unforgiving world, simultaneously at odds and in league with each other, while ultimately they simply need each other, need that contact, need that empathy, need community, born alone, fighting alone, facing the prospect of a death that...

“Hello?” said Yaro.

“My brother is not here,” said Arbop defensively.

“Really not here or lying not here?”

“Would you like to come in and have a look?”

“Nah. You might try something.”

“I'm married. You're the desperate one.”

“You're a sad, strange man,” said Yaro. “You're very lucky to have me outside your door. Go play with your blocks.”

Arbop did go play with his blocks, but not for very long. He started to build a great solid wall around the eastern edge of the city, which proportionally speaking would have been nearly a kilometre high in real life. Soon he realised that he had departed from his dream of realism and was only acting out a childish fantasy. He knocked the wall down with one swipe of the back of his hand, which made him feel gigantic. Sitting there, he indulged in a few deeply pleasurable moments of imagining himself as genuinely enormous, a mega-anti-Buddha lumbering in despair over his tortured city, if unsquished then only at his pleasure. Should he bellow and break all the windows? Sneeze and destroy the theatre district? Throw decency to the wind and make it rain?

It was time to go out into the city and begin the active search. It was a big city and the odds of finding anyone were extraordinarily low but there was something to be said for not sitting around helplessly. Give the world a chance to make you lucky. In any case sometimes a man needs a reason to go into town for no reason, knowing full well that his only mission is farcical and that he will pursue it anyway with a wry passion just to see what else might turn up. Arbop grabbed his jacket and forced open his front door with difficulty.

"I need a metro pass," he said, embarrassed at being slightly out of breath from mild exertion.

"Not so fast, sunshine," said Yaro. "You're not working until later. Where you going?"

"I don't even have to tell you!"

"So?" she said. "I'm just asking!"

"I'm having a little wander around. For fun."

"Sounds like trouble," she said, giving him the pass.



Arbop made his special face where he was able to lift just the corner of his upper lip and press his teeth together tightly. He thought it was charming and funny but had he been able to see it himself he would have found it closer to awkward and possibly grotesque. Yaro kicked him hard enough in the buttocks as he walked away.

“Hey!” said Arbop without looking back. “Trying to kill me?”

“You’d be dead,” said Yaro.

His metro pass was checked by three different officials on the short ride into town and then he had to use it in the machine to leave the system. The moment one embarks on a harmless meandering quest with half a notion to maybe find a dubious character there are authoritarians everywhere. Not only were there roving ticket checkers and machines but also superfluous guards hovering around the machines. Arbop imagined that if he were to ask one of them why they were there, he’d get some story about backup systems in case of machine malfunctions. *Ha!* Arbop laughed silently, picturing himself responding by poking the fellow in the chest and demanding to know why, if the guards were only there to help out, did he feel so intimidated by them? Why didn’t he just feel happy to see them? His poking would be adamant, forcing the man to step back and issue a warning.

By the time he got loose in the city Arbop felt tiny. The buildings seemed taller and more imposing than usual and no matter which alley he went down they leaned in over him and leered.

He decided to embrace his tininess and go about town in a minuscule fashion. If anything accidentally stepped on him, he would be able to survive by ducking into one of the little grooves on the sole of its gargantuan shoe. If a building fell on him, he would make sure he was standing where one of the open windows

was, like Buster Keaton in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* If Godzilla chose this day and this city? Easy. Between the toes. *He'd never even know I was there.*

Nobody would see him, small as he was, so he felt very free. He thought he might even dance gaily down the street with lots of twirls and skipping, darting in and out among the shoppers and amateur flâneurs and loving how they'd pay him no mind, but he felt too shy even as small as all that. Then he felt cowardly for feeling shy, so he did a little half skip, only somebody did notice and look up; Arbop immediately pretended the whole thing hadn't happened and the person hadn't looked. He turned the first corner he came to and felt like running. He ran, just to see how fast he could go, knowing he was only going for a short distance, just around the next corner, just to cover some distance and enter a new picture and shatter his fear of running. After a three-step sprint it was a jog, mostly out of self-consciousness, as if he merely had a reason to move quickly. Arbop, ordinary man with reasons, man with appointments and responsibilities, just getting out ahead a bit quickly, that's all. Sometimes a man sprints, it doesn't mean he's insane.

Now he found himself among some streets onto which he would not normally venture. They were out-of-the-way streets and he might as well have been in a different city entirely. He felt as if he might be in Prague or Northampton or Ben Tre, here, right in his own city, a hidden world just off the beaten track. His city was not his city, his knowledge just an arbitrary and flimsy framework, based on the least subtle clues imaginable, those that had been laid out by high streets and railway stations. How easy it is to expand your horizons with a simple shift of perspective. It's not necessary to travel. All you have to do is destroy something as simple as everything you know. Arbop ducked into a market and slowed down to a pace that was perhaps too leisurely. It's impossible to arrive at a natural pace when you have

to choose one consciously. He couldn't go as quickly as the people with a destination because walking that quickly would soon have him stopping somewhere artificially just in order to arrive, or else going endlessly around corners, or else disappearing over a horizon only to crawl back in the dark much later on. It was a path paved in stones of pure madness. Walking slowly like a casual browser was no better. Arbop had no shopping to do and it would be obvious that he was feigning. He would look like a thief or a pervert fondling objects with only ulterior motives. Somebody would call the police.

One assumes there's always some solution to a problem but sometimes, if there is, it is to endure it awkwardly and hope that either the situation changes or the feeling of awkwardness goes away like a smell you can't smell any more. But then sometimes an opportunity appears like it was just waiting for you to give up, a little flash of chance jumps up just to see if you're prepared to catch it.

At one corner of the market was a stall full of used yellow books, tremendously unappealing. Obviously nobody wanted these old wastes of paper that once represented someone's brightest hopes and Arbop only noticed the shop thanks to the special smell of vanilla mustiness caused by volatile organic compounds slowly giving up on literature. If he touched one of these slightly sticky specimens he'd probably become infested with mites and spend the rest of the afternoon rubbing his eyes into the back of his head. On the other hand, armed with one he could sit in a café for as long as he pleased and appear to be part of society. Each one cost less than a banana anyway so he decided to risk it. He could always leave it somewhere. Arbop bought a slim novel in a foreign language that he strongly suspected was Vietnamese. The proprietor gave him a knowing wink as he paid for it and Arbop noticed the fellow's striking resemblance to his brother Oliver. It gave

him a real start that took some getting used to. His brother could of course be everywhere. If he hadn't seen him so far it was only because he always went to the same places. Today's wandering had already changed the odds on everything.

The novel had several advantages. Arbop felt suddenly untrustworthy carrying this sort of literature, which made him exciting. Who reads foreign novels in the original language? Only somebody indecently time-rich. What an extravagance. Arbop would be highly suspect at a glance. Everyone would be able to tell, yet it was all in fun; even the authorities could be persuaded of the legitimacy of this form of humour from a man with an impeccable record on the perimeter. Once they found out he couldn't even read it they'd all have a good laugh. Furthermore he could sit and hold it with no chance that the words would draw him in just as his brother walked by unnoticed. Finally, it was not beyond his imagination that he would seem so interesting with his foreign book and his beguiling expression that some coy coquette might end up flirting with him in innocent exchanges full of subtext. They could trade quips, even insults, charmingly, with no thought of anything other than the mysterious exchange of humorous pleasure between individuals in the present moment. His wife might even go by on one of her errands and receive a jolting reminder of her husband's surprisingly obdurate vitality. All the things she might regret could be forgiven. All the things they might have done could be reclaimed. All his shames, everything, gone again, square one, like babies, what fools people are, how sad, what squanderers, like brainless bumper cars, how very sad, one can only love them from afar, but from afar one can love them very much. A café, that is, a novel, how perfect. A brother. All business, all now.

He still had not entirely calmed down by the time he identified a suitable café and ordered his latte from another fellow who also bore a certain resemblance to his brother. Just to check himself he had a look around at everyone in the café, everyone outside in the market as a whole, and sure enough within thirty seconds there were five or six plausible Oliverian candidates meandering this way and that. One of them even looked up at him with a wry, knowing smirk. Arbop knew of course, knew full well, that if he thought of Oliver Cromwell or Oliver Wendell Holmes or Oliver North and then looked around he'd see them too, see them everywhere, even without knowing what they looked like. Arbop's Oliver was going to have to do better than this if he wanted to be found. Pretty soon Arbop wasn't sure he'd know him from the nearest shoe salesman unless he came up, slapped him in the face, and called him by name.

There wasn't anywhere to sit in this café except a lonely stool by the front, and somebody had terrible body odour. You'd never smell that in the high-street cafés. Here was a bohemian who had courageously abandoned certain bourgeois values, only which one was he? Or she? It didn't matter. What did matter was finding a better place to sit, but the only empty spot had a warning sign on it informing any potential sitters that the table was reserved. For what time? Fifteen minutes from now. It's more than enough time to wolf down some coffee, but not without anxiety and the potential need to defend oneself against possible challengers. There was a name on the reservation card and the name was Arbop.

Now that was of course a source of amusement. There weren't too many Arbops in the phone book, indeed there were none other than Bodhamari Arbop himself presuming this duck-hole part of town used the same phone book as the solid familiar bit did. These Arbops must be from out of town. He could show his

array of personal identification cards and probably manage to claim the space as his own for a time and cause a lot of confusion unless they were personal friends of the owner. That was possible, even more than likely. Who makes reservations in such a place anyway? It was an anomaly, an absurdity. The owner must have taken this unusual measure for close friends of his as a special favour.

Arbop took a delighted, even feverish interest in these Arbops. There would be four or five of them judging by the size of the table. Now while he watched out for his brother and pretended to read he could amuse himself by imagining what the Arbops would look like and making predictions. They'd have great coats, for starters. At least one of them would have a moustache, probably the one that would certainly be wearing a hat and carrying a thick book of illustrations. The eldest of the women would look as if she were from another century, not by age but by manner. She would be elegant and would want the sort of drink they didn't have; she would settle for something else and do so graciously. Another woman in the party, younger and less confident but still admirable, would clearly be in awe of the other. They'd have brought along a visiting scholar with whom none of them were on familiar terms. They would all compete to impress him but in different ways. But there would also be among them someone awkward and unfortunate, a boy, not terribly overweight but plump enough so that his trousers, which were already too short, looked ridiculous. And wouldn't he know it! He would be our boy of perpetual agony. The others would bear him serenely. None of them would fit in with the prevailing hipster chic any more than original Bodhamari Arbop did. This place was full of the most obvious *de rigeur* fashions, and the only surprising thing was the persistence of their success: these people did look cool. There was no use denying it. It made no sense, and Arbop was suddenly jealous. He liked the waitress,

who was clearly from a peregrine elsewhere and probably had been briefly married to an extraordinarily famous rock star. She was a bony little beauty from whom drug abuse had exacted an exotic toll. Where did these cafés find such creatures? Whence came the scenesters here assembled?

The Arbops' appointed hour came and went. They were late. Now that was surely a risk, for how long could they expect a table to be held for them under such blatantly informal circumstances? Or perhaps tables would be held longer here than in fine restaurants where more money was at stake? Perhaps the holding of a table here was considered sacred and indefinite, the last principle worth dying for. Perhaps the sign wasn't even from today, perhaps it was from yesterday. Perhaps it had been there for months and had become a hallowed joke. Good god, had Arbop himself made the reservation years ago?

They never showed. What a disappointing café. Nobody slapped him or challenged him. Nobody stood up, shook a tract, and started an argument. No conversing among tables, urgently debating the issues of the day or making daring proposals.

Soon Arbop was back to wandering, having been neither flirted with nor provoked, and now seeing the backs of Effies everywhere he looked, always going around corners or disappearing into small crowds and failing to emerge. Here was a new game for the aimless, an aim for the gameless, think of a person and see how many times you can imagine them. It happens normally at train stations while waiting for someone. Suddenly a previously unnoticed proportion of the population has that generalised haircut, height, backpack, way of walking. Controlling the world is absurdly simple if you don't mind false starts and mistaken identities. But suddenly Arbop was being shaken by the shoulders.

“Follow me,” said Oliver.

“How do I know it’s you?” said Arbop.

Oliver just laughed in a warm and wholesome way as he turned and began walking rapidly away. Arbop considered the idea of not following him. Why should he? If it was an order, it was one he was not compelled to obey. He was a free man, like his brother, and they could each do as they liked, together or separately accordingly to the combination of their whims. So he was told to follow. So what? A good enough reason not to go! But he did follow, no closer than three paces behind and no further than six, like the tail of a kite. Oliver led them around the monument, around and around, Arbop stubbornly determined not to raise the obvious objections. Finally with a laugh Oliver squatted down, produced an extensible metal rod, jimmied it under a manhole cover, and raised it up enough to get a hand grip on it. The lid made a heavy scraping sound as Oliver pushed it off to one side. The next thing Arbop knew Oliver had disappeared down the hole, leaving Arbop with the decision, again, of whether to follow.

Down he went, beneath the city one sees, into the city one doesn’t. Surprisingly, it was not nearly as dark as he would have presumed. What Arbop saw was a labyrinth of interconnecting tunnels, lit by wall lamps in rusty iron enclosures. Nor was it deserted. There was a whole team of workers down there, arrayed around a system of large pipes at least half a metre in diameter, wisps of steam dancing around some of the joints. There were over a hundred miles of steam pipe below the city, connecting thousands of buildings to the same source of heat and pressure. The workers tending the pipes here were steamfitters. They were checking meters, employing tools, shouting at each other. All the work coalesced around one vertical tube that went back up through the street. Arbop understood what it was because he



had seen it as he went down the manhole — it was connected to an orange-and-white striped stand-up pipe in the middle of Farick Street, a visible protuberance of an otherwise hidden network, crazy and ignored, billowing cloud masses of steam that looked like it should be scalding but was actually strangely cool to the touch.

The tunnel in which he stood with Oliver and the steamfitters was ornate where he expected it to be dank and barren, covered with gorgeous Guastavino tile work. It looked like a sort of chapel, filled with devils.

“That’s too much sealant!” shouted one of the workers.

The worker applying the sealant waved off the complaint, as if to scoff, which made the first worker angry. She took off her protective visor so as to be able to shout more loudly.

“You’re an idiot,” she said. “That’s too much sealant.”

“What do you care?” came the reply. “What is it, coming out of your pocket?”

“If it migrates over and clogs the trap valves it could blow a hole through the street fifty feet wide, you moron.”

She turned away in disgust, incidentally towards Oliver and Arbop, who recognised her as Effie. Arbop was, quite understandably, taken aback.

“Effie,” he called to her but in a whisper, and then more loudly. “Effie!”

She looked at him for five seconds before she started shaking her head.

“What are you doing down here?” she said, walking over to him. “I mean, what the hell?”

“My brother is here,” he said, as if that answered the question. “You remember Oliver.”

“You guys shouldn’t be here,” she said. “You’re not allowed.”

“We’re just passing through,” said Oliver, cheerfully. “We’ll leave you to it.”

Oliver started tugging at Arbop’s arm to encourage him to continue their journey. Arbop slowly began to follow once more.

“Will you be home later?” he called out to Effie, but she didn’t answer. “Will you be home?”

But then they were further along the tunnel and Effie couldn’t even have heard him if he had shouted at the top of his lungs.

“Where are we going?” asked Arbop.

“Civic Centre!” said Oliver. “Ever been there?”

“Many times. Everything is in the Civic Centre.”

“Ever been to the basement?”

“Not in real life.”

“Let’s check it out. We’re going up in from the bottom here via the engineering room.”

They followed some tunnels, opened a few valves and some doors, emerged into a corridor and tiptoed through engineering. Finally they found themselves in an empty ballroom that would have been a great place to hold a large party.

“Dead,” said Arbop.

Oliver laughed and proceeded to walk across the dance floor, even doing a twirl. Arbop followed, and as nobody was looking, also did a twirl that not even Oliver saw. So Arbop did another one, and found that it was something he enjoyed tremendously. The whole excursion was worth it just for finally getting in a couple of twirls. That all came to an abrupt end of course when Oliver opened a door and a lot of smoke rolled out.

“Get in and shut the door!” came a voice.

Oliver disappeared into the room but Arbop wasn’t so sure. Why should he go in there? It was horrible. All that smoke. There was no way he was going in, and yet it was an intriguing invitation, that much had to be admitted. His brother had already gone in. He decided that there was nothing to be lost by poking his head in momentarily.

He poked his head in and saw the mayor, Strongman Simms. It was he who had issued the invitation, and apart from his brother he was the only man in the room. So. All the smoke was his.

“That’s a lot of smoke,” said Arbop, hesitantly.

“Get in,” said Simms.

“No,” said Arbop, just to see what would happen.

“Too much smoke,” said Oliver from inside the cloud. “You can’t blame him.”

“So I’ll stop smoking,” said Simms. “No problem. Get in.”

“Well, come on,” said Arbop, waving his hand around to indicate the problem.

“I don’t care if we change rooms,” said Simms. “But I’m not running around to find one. See if you can get us something at the top of the building and then come and let me know.”

“Go on,” urged Oliver.

“OK,” said Arbop.

He went back out of the ballroom the way he had come in, and decided partly to feel his way along with his eyes closed just to see if he could do it. At first he could only do one or two steps before he couldn’t stand it and had to open his

eyes, but it didn't take long for that to become four or five steps and then ten or fifteen. He bumped into things but he had stopped caring. He only peeked to locate the stairwells. Some bureaucrats passed him as he felt his way along but they didn't say anything. Arbop thought he felt their presence but he wasn't sure and he decided again not to care. The thing that did bother him was when he brushed past some spider webs, which is terrible with your eyes closed. He kept his eyes open after that and that is how that particular game ended.

Arbop realised that he wasn't really sure what he was looking for. How was he supposed to know whether a room was available? Even if he found an empty one, he couldn't know if it was booked for somebody else's meeting in ten minutes' time. Had Simms even specified the word 'room'? Arbop was sure he had said the top of the building. He had reached the top floor, and it was like an attic space. No rooms. No windows. No smoke, thankfully. Just a rocking chair and some abandoned dolls. Maybe this was the place. But he could get to the top of the top if he went out of the roof. It looked like there might be a small hatch, could be worth a push.

He pushed it and went through upwards. Outside. To the tippy top.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Arbop was surprised to wake up sprawled not on his bed, but near it, on the floor. It was not a place he would ever have chosen to fall asleep. His back and his neck were stiff and his eyes felt a bit dry. He sat up and experienced his bewilderment for a few minutes, and then stood so as to begin the process of stretching himself back into order. What time was it? What day was it?

Almost immediately he noticed that a block was out of place on the Civic Centre roof. He made a girlish sound with his tongue off the roof of his mouth and replaced the block with some annoyance. He supposed that he had knocked it loose in his inexplicable sleep on the floor, but it would have been a tricky hit that got that block off without damaging anything else along the way. Between where he was lying and the Civic Centre was the central monument and a wide boulevard full of street lights that should have been knocked over. Obviously he had arched in some peculiar way and it was a puzzle not worth solving. The damage was the damage, what good were questions? Was that steam down on Farick? No. Gone.

But no, really, what day was it? He was in his clothes. Good. That would make it easy not to change his underpants. He must have simply dozed off while examining the perimeter of his model city. Smoky memory wisps teased the edges of his consciousness like children playing hide and seek in some horror movie. Wake up, Arbop. Just wake up, everything you need to know you know. Dreams are always just ducking out the back door as plans come in the window. Arbop checked his watch. Two thirty. Now it was on the cusp of a bit late to go into the town on his day off as he had planned. He went and opened his front door a crack. It was easy to do. The door was normal-sized. It was raining heavily but one must never let that affect one's plans. One must simply go forward regardless.

“Hey!” he said.

“Aren’t you going to do anything at all today?” asked Yaro.

“Like what?”

“How should I know?”

“I didn’t already ask you for a metro pass did I?”

“When?”

“Today.”

“You don’t even know.”

“Seriously.”

“I’m being serious.”

“I didn’t already go into town right?”

“Arbop messes with my head, check it out!”

Arbop shut the door. It was chilly out there, the first cold day of the maturing autumn. He would need to dig out his warmer jacket from the storage box in which it had been filed away. Retrieving things that had been filed away is a pleasurable experience. It is a double pleasure, since in addition to the pleasure of the desired object retrieved, there is the pleasure of feeling well organised, that one has systems that function, that there is a functional order. The box was right where it ought to have been, right where it had been left, in the small cupboard up aheight in his living room. The box itself was something of a let-down, organisationally speaking, since it contained not only one type of object, for example clothing or outerwear, but a miscellaneous assortment: always a bit of a cheat. A sign of slapdashery, entropy encroaching around the edges of his structure. There was his warm jacket all right, along with some extension cords, a pair of old headphones, a priceless potato peeler from a long-dead salesman, and some books, one of which tumbled out of the box

when he removed the jacket. It was a yellowed old novel in an exotic language with gorgeous diacritics that he had no ability to read and no memory of acquiring.

*But obviously I did acquire it*, thought Arbop flipping through its brittle pages. *I guess.*

The book gave him an idea. He might as well ask for a pass, head into town. He could use the book as an excuse to hang out in a café and blend in like a fellow who reads books. He could find a perch and keep a lookout for his brother. A book in a foreign language was perfect — he would be unable to get lost in it. He could stay vigilant. It was the ideal book for posing behind.

His brother! Could his brother have slipped into his home and left the book tauntingly on top of the jacket? It made as much sense as anything else. Hide and seek, hide and seek. Arbop looked in every closet and under every chair until he was satisfied that either his brother was not there, or he was so good at hiding that Arbop should be afraid to find him. Fine. The original plan then. Into the town, a café, and then perhaps a stroll along the perimeter for an informal inspection on his own time, on his own dime. The line between personal and professional was gone.

He opened his closet to grab a backpack and was startled to find his friend G crouched there. They looked at each other without speaking, because both of them were trying to find the right words to say. Both of them had been around the block a few times. Neither of them was keen to overreact.

“Can I use your bathroom?” asked G.

“I thought I had checked all the closets,” said Arbop.

“You opened the door,” said G, “but you didn’t see me down here. I couldn’t believe it.”

“Seriously?”

“Don’t you remember opening that door?”

“Yes,” said Arbop, marvelling at the thought of it. “I didn’t see you because I wasn’t expecting to see you.”

“That’s the human mind for you.”

“It’s the only explanation.”

“Yeah. Can I use your bathroom?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks.”

G unfolded himself vertically and trotted off to the toilet. Arbop sat on the edge of his bed and composed himself, thinking nice things about his friend G and waiting for the sound of flushing that would indicate his imminent return. It came presently.

“Well you really do have slugs,” said G, assuming a leaning position against the wall next to the closet where he had been hiding. “Middle of the kitchen floor. Almost squished one.”

“Yeah. It’s insane.”

The ensuing brief silence was a classically awkward one. Arbop struggled with finding the right words to ask about why G was in his closet to begin with. Finally G saved him the trouble.

“You’re probably wondering what I was doing in your closet.”

Arbop admitted that he had been wondering that, aiming for a tone of voice and body language that would convey that he had only wondered it very slightly and not in any way that implied that G had done anything improper. G, for his part, graciously conceded that it was a fair question, one that he himself would certainly have asked were their roles reversed. Then, with no further interrogation being



necessary, G freely volunteered that their mutual CPP superiors had asked him to keep an eye on Arbop, with the lamely conciliatory proviso that it was, somehow, for his own good, that is, his own protection.

“What are you protecting me from?” asked Arbop, as gently as he could.

After hearing that G was only giving evasive responses, an emboldened Arbop began to lay out a scenario in unminced words. In it, Arbop had come under suspicion of wreaking havoc in the city by the abstruse means of his tiny and improbable simulacrum, aided and abetted no doubt by his untrustworthy exiled brother Oliver, whose poor opinions were well known, as was his intention to insult the perimeter for what could only be unwholesome purposes. Couldn’t everyone see that Arbop’s feelings about his undesirable sibling, far from projecting unalloyed rejection, rather mingled envy, bitterness, loss, admiration, regret, distrust, and love? Wouldn’t everyone adopt the least generous interpretation, that Arbop’s position as a CPP man would provide the perfect cover for aiding and abetting a malicious breach? Blood is thicker than paperwork, everyone knew it, they were all suspicious, everyone was so eager to start casting aspersions on anyone else in the cowardly hope that The Great Finger would never slowly turn and direct the full force of its appalling singling-out beam upon them. The closer the trouble comes to home, the more eager they are to betray, the more they’ll...

G not only denied all of that, he implied it was all pure lunacy.

“Nah man,” he said. “Get real now. I’ll tell you what it is. You know how you’ve been questioning all the bodies turning up around town?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’ve cast some aspersions on the investigative effort.”

“Me? No, well, I mean...”

“In the presence of Grimsby.”

Arbop’s shoulders dropped as if to yield to the change in direction the conversation had irretrievably taken. Some processing time was needed. What was G trying to imply? What did it mean? Why would any of it mean that he needed to have an eye kept on him? Did they think he was involved, that he was a serial killer, the sort who wanted nothing more than to be caught? Did they want to make sure he didn’t suddenly launch into his own personal full-scale alternative investigation of every death in the city just so he could sell a bunch of sensationalist hooley to some all-too-credulous cult following?

“Nah man,” said G. “It’s just a question of, you know, is Arbop losing his grip, is he OK, go and check on him.”

“Secretly,” said Arbop. “From his closet.”

“Come on, I wasn’t actually in your closet.”

“Yes you were, you were crouching down right there, in the closet, with the door closed.”

“Nah, come on, you make it sound like I was planning on living in there or something, it’s not like that. I was just messing with you, might’ve jumped out and scared you. Am I your friend or what here? It was like hide and seek.”

“Only I didn’t know I was playing.”

“Exactly, now you’re getting it. I’m curious about that book you’re holding there, what is that, Spanish? Can you read that?”

“It’s not Spanish.”

“Spanish is always magic realism. I can’t stand magic realism.”

“It’s not magic realism.”

“I hate magic realism.”

“Relax. Nobody’s saying it’s magic realism.”

They soon agreed that the book was all right because it was not necessarily magic realism, and that Arbop should just go ahead into town and pose with it if he wanted to. Arbop was going to mention that he was considering a personal-hours trip to the perimeter, and considered inviting G to come along and help with the inspection, but thought better of it. Nothing personal. It’s just G was possibly completely untrustworthy, and Arbop wanted the exhilaration of his unfettered private personal freedom. He would go alone.

“Would you like to stay here?” asked Arbop. “Or...”

G said he would leave on his own, in his own way, same way he had gotten in, in his own time, if that was all right with Arbop. It was. Arbop didn’t want to make a scene over it.

“You should brush your teeth though,” said G. “Probably. Right? Before you go out?”

“With toothpaste!” came Yaro’s voice from outside the door.

“I was going to!” said Arbop, and he went and did it.

“And change your underpants!” she added, loudly.

His front door had expanded so he had to do a lot of yanking and grunting to get it open, which did not make him feel manly in the presence of his friend. His parting gesture was a shrug. Outside, Yaro awaited with her wise-ass smirk. Arbop studied her expression for clues with more than the usual care.

“Yo, he-man,” she said. “If you need help opening a door just ask, friend, I’m always right here for you. Especially with that minty fresh breath.”

“Can I get my pass please?”

“I don’t know, where you trying to go?”

“Anywhere I want!”

“Touchy touchy touchy today. You’ve got serious problems, you know that? You really need to learn how to relax.”

Arbop made it into the city centre, enjoying his curved-handle umbrella because carrying it always made him feel like Charlie Chaplin, and spent some time posing with his book in a café. Nobody seemed to appreciate him, nobody flirted, and when he looked around everybody looked exactly like his brother and Emperor Caracalla or anybody else you please. He went to a used book store in the market and snuck his book onto a shelf. Then he made straight for the perimeter and was not intercepted by his brother, although he saw his wife several times, going into shops and around corners, sometimes several times simultaneously. He also saw two more bodies in an alley, but presumed the cases would have already been solved, and did nothing, nothing but leave them to the professionals. He wasn’t even on the clock.

As he approached the subway stop, the street erupted. A manhole cover blew a hundred metres straight up into the sky under a massive plume of steam. But the manhole cover was the least of it, although it was important to whomever it landed near. The steam geyser blasted a thousand feet high, higher than most of the buildings in the area, and continued blasting for the next two hours. A tow truck was hurled up so high that it landed on a city bus. Every car alarm within an eight-block radius went off and sirens began to wail. Was it a terrorist attack? A lone nut with a bomb? Was the earth finally tearing itself apart in a violent fit of cosmic angst? No. The rain had cooled some hot pipes and caused condensation within, and because of a faulty repair job, the clogged valves were unable to remove it. A steam hammer situation resulted, with an unstable multi-phasic flow, pressure had built up, and

eventually: baboom. The crater left at the end of it all was ten metres wide and four metres deep. The rupture revealed the hidden world of tunnels below to anyone who dared to peer in before the cordons and police barriers were set up to keep people away for their own safety.

In the heat of the initial moments, however, the hole was obscured by the steam and Arbop wasn't looking down, he was looking up in astonishment at the enormous tower of pure steam. He saw, beyond the roiling column, far above, giant fingers approach from the sky, distorted as if seen through curved glass. Enormous fingertip pads spread and whitened with pressure against the invisible atmosphere, as if it were a solid transparent dome. Arbop felt uplifted and became dizzy. There was a great shaking and then snow rose up and began to fall.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The potatoes below John F Kennedy's feet were shiny. For all anyone could see with the naked eye, entire yocto-civilisations might be living on them, invisible even to the Pulmonata who were having a secret meeting under a nearby cabbage. Everyone knows that a picture of all the galaxies in the universe looks exactly like a picture of bacteria in a petri dish.

Kennedy had maintained contact with Arbop and taken a keen interest in his descriptions of the profoundly simple joys of allotment gardening. They'd had many a long, late-night telephone conversation about which tomatoes like the greenhouse and which can be planted outside, about how ladybirds are good because they'll eat your aphids, about how basil thrives in the heat, the president propped up on pillows propounding, Arbop agreeing, Jackie Kennedy, in an elegantly understated pure cotton coordinated separate pyjama ensemble, urging her husband to hang up the phone already and turn out the light by the bed.

There was normally a long waiting list for an allotment garden, but Kennedy had pulled a few strings and flexed his executive privilege; he had acquired the plot adjacent to Arbop's and could often be found there, digging deep in thought and soil.

"These crops signify renewal as well as change," Kennedy declared. "We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of a revolution in cultivation. Disciplined by hard work and bitter winters, becoming as one with the soil on which we strive, we shall free ourselves and cast off the chains of poverty."

"That sounds good," said Effie, and Arbop smiled.

Effie was picking chamomile flowers and Arbop was getting under the potatoes with a spade.

“Careful,” said Kennedy. “Don’t jib them!”

“Check out this one,” said Arbop.

Arbop held up a first early that was almost perfectly spherical.

“Like a baseball,” said Effie.

“I was thinking globe,” said Arbop. “Because I’m so cosmic.”

“Snow globe more like,” said Effie. “That’s disgusting.”

She was referring to the white mould that covered a substantial portion of the potato. Grimsby could be detected by a most discerning eye shifting his weight from one foot to the other against the fence by the Osagi cabbages.

“Cloud cover,” said Kennedy. “This will be what the planet looks like from space. One day, before the end of the decade, we will send a man to the moon and return him safely to earth, and this is the sort of thing he will see.”

Kennedy reached out to take the potato and give it a closer look. Immediately he started nodding authoritatively.

“Got yourself a little stem rot, my friend,” said Kennedy. “*Sclerotinia sclerotiorum*. Not good. Your apothecia could be spreading spores all over the whole allotment. You are officially a threat to the entire community. I may need to get a secret team to take you out.”

‘My apothecia? Maybe I got somebody else’s apothecia. Maybe it’s *your* apothecia.’

‘Maybe. You’ve got a slug problem too, look at your chard.’

‘Snails.’

‘The Pulmonata in any case.’

Did the chair of the secret meeting of Pulmonata, a plump and glistening slug without a name, look up when he heard the reference? One could have been looking

directly at him the whole time and not have been certain of the answer. Even if a sequence could be detected, it might not be correlation, and if it were correlation it might not be causation. One could always fall victim to the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. You could sit there all day and shout “hey toad bait!” and see him twitch and thereby develop at best a properly falsifiable theory on the matter, which would stand until some malacologist came along and disproved it on the basis that gastropods have no sense of hearing. How then to act among slugs, spies, and strangers? The only safe course is to heed the usual good advice: be kind, and develop the courage to express yourself honestly and the maturity to do it humbly.

Communications at these grand councils of the Pulmonata were facilitated by the tiny faerie historians who not only took the minutes but intuited and mind-whispered the intentions of each to all of the others. The snails were the elders of course, not merely by virtue of their greater lifespans but by common acknowledgement of the greater experience and wisdom thereby gained. Senior slugs could still serve as chair, as in the present case, but when it came to making decisions they served strictly in an advisory capacity. To be sure, the snails, with their fancy shells and their monopoly on authority, elicited rudimentary impulses of resentment among some of the slugs, but others urged obedience and all erred on the side of caution.

“We will take the chard,” mind-whispered the faeries on behalf of the chair.  
“All of it.”

The assembled mass murmured its approval.

“And then the Osagi as well!” transmitted the faeries in the mind-whispering equivalent of a podium-pounding bellow.



The mass quivered in the mutely invertebrate equivalent of a roar. The Osagi cabbage was everyone's favourite. It grew dense and wrinkly into a dark pink ovoid shape the size of a small loaf of artisanal bread. Looking very much like a human brain, it induced in the Pulmonata a frenzy of slow-motion masticatory ecstasy. Some of the snails present slimed themselves in pleasure at the mere thought of it.

"There are some copper rings in the community shed," said Kennedy. "You should put them around the perimeter of each vegetable, especially the young ones."

"Does that really work?" said Arbop.

"So indicates the best intelligence I've got," said Kennedy. "They won't cross it."

"Like vampires and running water," said Effie, eliciting a smile and a friendly finger point from the president.

"Does *that* really work?" asked Arbop.

"Sure," said Effie. "In *real* vampire movies."

"I better try it," said Arbop, standing up and brushing dirt off of himself.

It was a short walk down the central path to the community shed and he would have to pass Babs' plot on his way. Arbop didn't know Babs' real name but he called her Babs, short for Babushka, because she always wore a headscarf tied under her chin in the manner Arbop imagined was preferred by old Russian grandmother types. He had also long harboured the desire to know somebody called Babs. He didn't like Babs because she was a well-known allotment nuisance, always complaining and causing trouble and making reckless allegations. Someone was stealing her apples. Someone was trying to murder her. Someone had used her manure. She had tried to install a spy camera on her shed but it was raised as an agenda item at the annual general meeting and got voted away. Babs had a victim

complex and if she took against you it meant a stream of accusatory letters in ersatz legalese for what could be years. Several successive chairmen had resigned, debilitated, seeking therapy. Arbop resolved to keep his gaze down and front so as not to make accidental eye contact with her. She would try to draw him in, try to get him embroiled in some controversy, try to enlist him on her side in some absurd battle. There she was just ahead out of the corner of his eye, plausibly just out of view.

Arbop began to hum a stupid tune to himself, wondering why he couldn't think of a good song at times like these.

"Oh dear," said Babs as he approached.

Arbop made sure not to so much as twitch in her direction, not even when he noticed that she was buried up to her armpits in soil. Only the very top of her poked out. Her arms were free and were splayed out, clutching at the soil around her. What on earth was she doing in the ground? A grotesque play for sympathy or attention? An addiction to drama?

"I daresay," said Babs, her little hands flapping at him as best they could to no avail.

Arbop made it all the way to the shed and forgot why he had gone there.

*Ah yes*, he thought. Copper rings. He went in for a rummage and found some before too long. Did they belong to anyone? Well, they were in the communal shed. Possibly he should offer some money, or he could replace them at his own cost later on. They were in the communal shed. It would be all right to use them. It was Kennedy's idea. If anyone had a problem with it they could take it up with the goddamned president of the country.

Naturally he had to walk past Babs again on his way back. It's not possible to create the appearance of unselfconsciousness by humming self-consciously, but it didn't stop Arbop from trying. There was the top of Babs sprouting from the soil, arms jiggling awkwardly, hands clutching, her face a plaintive mask of theatrical supplication.

"Hello?" she cried out.

Arbop knew that her cry, although weak, was just ever so slightly too loud for him to maintain a convincing pretence of not having heard. If only he had worn headphones. Too late. The tiniest hesitation gave away the game. There was no getting around it.

"Now that's getting into the soil!" he shouted gaily, pointing at her and winking without slackening his pace. "That's a bit of digging, that! I'm going to go try that now!"

As he walked off he felt he had no choice but to put all his money on the jaunty tone he had adopted, and in order to preclude any further communication he boldly began to sing some atonal and ostentatious words about sunshine and beautiful days that didn't even comprise a real song. Could she really have been in some sort of trouble? It was a vague possibility, but the larger one was that she was up to something that was best avoided. Her performance had appeared mannered, but then it had to be admitted that there was a good deal of uncertainty concerning what somebody in that particular predicament ought to look like.

As he approached his own plot he saw Kennedy and Effie laughing and chatting. He continued trying to justify his decision to ignore Babs. If you changed one thing in a complex interdependent system, all bets were off. What if he had stopped to see what was going on with Babs, had taken the time to pull her out of

the soil if need be? Who dared imagine what the chaotic tradeoffs might be from the old butterfly effect? What if Arbop could only have pulled her out if it then rained all the time, or Cambodia was destroyed, or people's toes fell off, or the laws of physics were arbitrarily suspended and everyone floated away or collapsed? What if everything depended on Arbop not engaging with her at that moment? What if everything had counted on the opposite?

"Found them," said Arbop, holding up the copper rings.

"Good man," said Kennedy, winking at Effie with innocent amusement and seasoned happiness.

Arbop, with Effie and Kennedy's help, placed the copper rings around as much of the cabbage and chard as he could. It was only by pure chance that the secret meeting went undiscovered and undisturbed.

"What is this now?" emanated a slug under the cabbage, slowly processing the introduction of the offensive metal.

The faeries flitted about, passing along the question and, with it, awareness of the news. Thereafter they were busy transmitting all the emanations that ensued.

"I hate those things," said a snail.

"It changes nothing," said another snail.

"We cannot cross them!" said a slug. "It is forbidden!"

"I am afraid!" cried another slug without embarrassment.

"Have any of you ever actually touched one?" said another.

The slug who served as chair squoodged his eye stalks in the direction of the council of snails. One of the elders nodded, its head glistening sagely.

"The plan shall proceed," said the chair.

There followed much silence in and around the usual stately munching. It was not unusual for considerable time to elapse between agenda items at secret meetings of the Pulmonata.

“That ought to do it,” said Kennedy.

“Hope so,” said Arbop, brushing soil from his hands onto his trousers. “I can’t quite shake my scepticism.”

“Well,” said Effie. “The effort is more fun when you know that everything’s futile.”

“As Henry L. Stimson wrote in 1947,” said Kennedy, “no private program and no public policy, in any section of our national life, can now escape from the compelling fact that if it is not framed with reference to the world, it is framed with perfect futility.”

“By the way,” said Arbop, gathering up his tools in the end-of-garden-time ritual, “Babs is buried again.”

“Babs?” said Kennedy.

“Poor thing,” said Effie.

“*Rettungspflicht!*” said Grimsby all of a sudden, loudly.

Even Kennedy had forgotten he was there, so well had he blended into the background, but he had everyone’s attention now. Grimsby stepped forward and produced a dossier, from which he extracted a single piece of paper, cleared his throat, and began to read. He stated Babs’ full name, the date, a clinically neutral description of her predicament, and a narrative of Arbop’s behaviour that imputed malicious intent. He included several other German words, pronouncing them admirably, all of which in context were discernible as utterly humourless admonishments for neglect of the legal duty to rescue.

Arbop lifted another whitish potato globe out of the ground and stared at it. He knew it was true, and he felt guilty about it. He should have helped her. Why hadn't he helped her? Did he hate neediness so much? If it was a ploy for attention, would it have killed him to provide some? He hurled the potato across the plot into the compost bin.

"Maybe it is more like a baseball," he said to Effie.

"I'm just going to go on ahead and start digging her up," said Effie, backing away from the group.

"I was just about to," said Kennedy.

Grimsby sneered as he put away his dossier.

Under the nearby cabbage at the secret meeting, the subject of martyrdom operations had been raised. A somewhat charismatic, freethinking slug had raised questions, eloquent questions, about why it was always slugs, and never snails, who were compelled to enter people's homes and come under the crushing weight of nocturnal human heels. He was making an appeal to democracy, yet there was an elitist subtext: who, after all, had evolved from whom? Still, they were an informal group, the Pulmonata, not a strict order or subclass, all the better to operate fluidly, to congregate on an ad hoc basis, to assemble and disassemble a variety of alliances of convenience for particular purposes. All of this was based on common interest, all of this required mutual respect. Yes, snails could be and often were crushed too in the wild interstices of the urban environment. Yes, snails could live far longer than slugs, especially in captivity, but who knows what slug lifespans might be if anyone could stand to adopt one? Yes, there were many advantages to having shed the shell, but was there not an implied pejorative in having one's primary distinguishing characteristic be the very thing that one lacks? Snail: has shell. Slug: does not have

shell. Must it follow then that snail stays outside, slug goes in and gets smeared on the tiles? No, they were not all the same, said the eloquent slug. But they shared many bonds, connections made deep by history and coevolution.

“Do we not all have the pallial lung?” he concluded, to moist applause.

Babs felt dizzy and hot as she clambered out of the pedosphere. Kennedy and Effie were just arriving and offered hands up, which Babs refused without actually spitting. Arbop brought up the rear at his own more deliberate pace.

“Thank goodness you’re all right,” said Arbop, upon seeing her.

As Babs scowled menacingly, Grimsby took some notes on his little notepad and then dove into the hole Babs had made and was lost to view. They all peered in after him, but the hole was deep.

“Is he always like that?” asked Effie.

“He chose to go into the ground at a breathtaking pace,” said Kennedy. “Vast stretches of the unknown and the unanswered and the unfinished still far outstrip our collective comprehension. I would deny no man his right to dig for the truth, or for happiness, or for any peaceable pursuit.”

“I guess he’s trying to become one with the soil,” said Arbop.

“But will the soil have him?” asked Effie, rhetorically.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Arbop woke up in his own bed, alone. Nobody's wife was there, nobody's children, and no friends, lovers, fancy ladies, or presidents hanging around. Just Arbop and the silence of everything that was missing. He swung his bare feet over the edge of the bed and where he had hoped to find slippers there was only a squish. As he shuddered he instinctively kicked his foot up and a slug went sailing across the room and landed with a splat against the far wall. Arbop noted the hollowness of the sound, as if the room didn't even have any furniture, so empty were the reverberations.

There wasn't time to worry about it just then, but it amused the otherwise-mortified Arbop to consider just briefly the notion that he had lost his mind entirely and that everything he had accepted as reality was nothing more substantial than a heavily reinforced set of assumptions based on mediated information amplified by his own imagination. He could well have gone running half-cocked into any number of blind alleys of purported truth without realising it. This was all perfectly plausible in theory and elicited from Arbop a kind of homicidal smile, the smile of a slug squisher being struck funny. True or false, real or unreal, sane or insane, if you couldn't tell then it didn't matter. If you didn't care you'd never tell. In any case the dignity of the mentally ill was officially recognised long ago with the passage of the Lunacy Act of 1845, despite its name, which among other things recognised that there were many more insane children than had been commonly appreciated. Workhouses and prisons would henceforth be for the sane. If Arbop were mad, he thought, so be it, so was everyone else.

The slugs were getting bolder, closer, venturing out of the kitchen. Arbop scanned the wood floor and quickly spotted the slime trail, which led to the closet.



This was the closet in which he had found G crouched, so naturally Arbop entertained the notion that G himself was a shape-shifting slug, or was in cahoots, or that they shared means and possibly rites of passage. It's not that he thought it was true or real or sane, but only that he enjoyed imagining it. A man who starts his day by stepping on a slug in his bare feet is allowed a maniacal moment or two to regain his balance. He would need to tend those feet as they were slimy with all the kinds of slime the thing's valves and innards could produce. But first he'd follow that trail, follow the slime. *Follow the money*, Arbop thought to himself, eyes crinkling in amusement, *follow the slime*.

He opened the closet door and looked closely at the floor. This was something that he had not only never done before, he had actively avoided doing it. He became aware of this now because of how afraid it was making him. Closet floors, the backs of closets, you'd have to be brave to examine them very closely, you'd have to prepared to meet the worst, to find things, to deal with them, to get men in if necessary, the straightforward sort with tools who didn't suffer from horrors and aversion. Arbop found the end of the trail and once again marvelled at how a slime trail could just end in the middle of somewhere, or the middle of nowhere. He tapped all around the floor boards and they sounded as hollow as a birthday with no friends. One of them jiggled a bit and he dared to bounce his finger off it more vigorously. It came up quite a bit, enough in fact for him to get his hand underneath and lift, and discover that it was connected to a few other floor boards, that it was a hatch, that beneath it was a blackness, an oubliette perhaps, more likely a tunnel. This must be how G had gotten in. Was the tunnel full of slugs? Had G stepped on any on his way in? Had any hitched a ride on his person?

Arbop quickly imagined sticking his head into the tunnel opening and confronting the hideous glistening head of a slug the size of a walrus, and then he was done imagining anything. He was aware of the need to attend to the slug slime on his foot and that he hadn't brushed his teeth yet. Nor had he gotten dressed. Today should be a new underpants day. On the other hand, here was a passage into a tunnel in his closet that begged immediate exploration. Pulled in so many different directions, Arbop felt like he had been handed an analytical puzzle on a college entrance exam. He decided: de-slime, teeth, clothes, tunnel. If that didn't get him into the finest universities then there was no justice.

He was very annoyed to discover, during the very early stages of de-sliming, that another toe had gone missing. This made four in all, three on one foot and one on the other. There would have to be another doctor's visit, which was something else to add to the organisational challenge. It might be getting harder to walk by now, but as before there was no pain and no bleeding, so he would do the teeth and the dressing and the tunnel first, as planned, and simply add doctor to the end of the list.

Much to his own shame, his initial impulses were to try to blame somebody for his toe loss. He brushed his teeth and cast his mind around wildly with thoughts of what kind of thieves and black market toe salesmen might have gained access to his home in the night by this ridiculously unsecured tunnel. By the time he was tying his shoes, however, he realised that it was extremely unlikely anybody could have removed one of his toes without waking him up. Could it have been a slug attack? A slow and painless chew-off?

Yaro ought to know something, and if not she needed a reprimand. This would be another task and it would jump to the head of the queue. Arbop yanked the front door open with a grunt and stuck his head out.

“There’s been a lot of unusual activity inside lately,” he informed Yaro. “I’m beginning to wonder what good you are.”

“Nothing gets past me, sunshine,” she said. “My reports are relentless.”

“We’re on the same team, you know, in case you hadn’t realised.”

“Settle down now sweetcakes,” said Yaro. “You sound like you’re losing your grip.”

Arbop snorted a small laugh and started to shut the door before turning back to call out a parting shot in a raised voice.

“What makes you think you’re not mad?”

“Watching you,” came her instant reply, along with a wink and a pointing finger.

Arbop winked and pointed back. When was Yaro’s birthday? He had no idea and the thought disturbed him. How many of her birthdays had he missed? It would be so nice to get her a present. What on earth would she like? He withdrew into his home, shut the door, and disappeared down into his private tunnel. He reappeared in his closet within the minute, having discovered exactly how dark it was down there: totally dark. A bit of a rummage, a torch, and then nearly back at it, but then he remembered: breakfast. He had forgotten to eat. What a thing to leave off his list. It would be foolhardy to enter the tunnel on an empty stomach. He made some toast, put butter and honey on it, and sat down to listen to himself chew for a few minutes. It made him wish he knew of a good radio show. Teeth again? Nah. Into the tunnel.

Not only was it dark, but quite cool. He could have done with a jumper but he had had quite enough of the faffing about and the going back for things, so he proceeded with a shiver playing about his spine. It is thrilling to wield a beam of light in utter blackness, and Arbop enjoyed the visual aesthetic as much as the joy of the unknown.

He had dropped down into a concrete tunnel devoid of decoration. There were only two directions, so he chose the one that seemed to be sloping more slightly downwards, as he was in a mood for getting in deep. Time was difficult to gauge somehow in the blackened depths, but it was perhaps fifteen minutes or so and an indeterminate distance into his slow-and-careful journey that he came to the next decision point, a fork in the road. Again he selected the path that suggested a more downward trajectory, and as he strode along one cautious step at a time, he was happy to see that some of the branches, at any rate, had some lights on the walls. They shone upwards onto the curved brick ceiling in a criss-cross pattern, nice blue lights, so it wasn't quite as desolate as all that. The sensation of unreality that had wordlessly accompanied him began to recede and he began to accept that the tunnel network was a normal thing. After all, it had lights. It had been looked after. He turned off his torch. There, ahead, there were even tiles. It was a civilised tunnel, and if he ran into anybody, it was quite likely that they'd be reasonable and have a decent reason for being down there. If they were to question his right to be there, he would simply note that, after all, the damned network connected right to his home, he had every right to explore it, as much right as anyone else, even a workman.

Arbop had eventually made so many turns that he suddenly became concerned that he might not even be able to find his way back home. He reassured

himself with the sensible thought that he could really exit anywhere and it would be all right, he'd be somewhere and he could get back home like a normal person, above ground. There would surely be many exits and any one of them would do perfectly well.

Tunnels are full of interesting sounds: a ploppy water drop; distant echoes; footsteps; one's own voice. Partly because he felt lonely and afraid and partly because he liked the sound of it, Arbop began to say nonsense words in a low and croaky voice, over and over, to keep himself company, to keep himself amused.

"Baroopa, baroopaba, dakka budendeet," he said, as deep and low as he could. "Robbie bobbie, robbie bobbie."

"Ever seen a termite mound?" came a voice from a nearby darkness.

Arbop jumped and felt the blood rise to his face with embarrassment. Had it never occurred to him that someone might hear his nonsense, or had it slightly occurred to him and he was daring it to happen? He turned, hot in the cheek, and saw that he had walked right past a black recess without even noticing it. In it stood a man.

"Nope," said Arbop.

The man stepped out from the shadows as Arbop's fingers reached for his nonexistent gun or knife even as he found it enjoyable, even amusing. The man had a very striking appearance. One of his ears was grossly larger than the other one, his eyebrows were mismatched, and he had a great diagonal scar across the length of his face. The man seemed familiar, although Arbop had no specific recollection of ever meeting him, and he was the sort of man anybody would remember meeting. Perhaps it was the kindly look in his eyes that reminded him of other kind people he had known.

“Oh, they rise real high,” said he man. “Like little skyscrapers. They’re not the least phallic things on the planet, but to me they look like middle fingers raised at us all.”

“That tells me a lot about your attitude.”

“And they’re full of tunnels. Just like this one, but obviously much smaller.”

“So we’re like termites, is that your point?”

“There are so many differences between us and them I don’t have time to name half of them. But you’d get rid of them, wouldn’t you, if they were in your house?”

“I would try to, I admit that. I don’t think I’d get used to living with that. They’re not like spiders.”

“They’re not anything like spiders.”

“Right.”

“Have you ever wanted to get rid of most of the people?”

“No.”

“Be honest.”

“No,” said Arbop confidently. “I don’t ever want to get rid of most of the people.”

The man laughed and it was not a harsh or evil laugh, but a welcoming one, a laugh of brotherly love.

“All right,” said the man. “But you’ll admit that not all people are alike.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re not all the same. Some are different from others.”

“I suppose so.”

“Sure. You’ve got tall and short, would you agree?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. And some have a good sense of humour, others are smug, some think of other people’s needs, others are very selfish, no?”

“All true.”

“Exactly. And some you simply like more than others. Would you go so far as to say that some people are irritating?”

Arbop gave the man a meaningful smirk.

“Very good!” said the man. “No one can blame you for thinking so. And do you think you could get everyone to change to suit you? I mean is there even the slightest possibility of that?”

“Obviously not.”

“Of course not, that’s obvious isn’t it?”

“I don’t need to like everyone.”

“Well exactly. You took my next words right out of my mouth and said them better than I could have myself. Diversity is beautiful and good and necessary, am I right?”

“Usually.”

“Of course. We agree on so much. And would you say the world was going to hell in a hand basket? I mean just generally. Just more or less. Are people fairly ruining everything and making a tragic, brutal mess of things? Or am I wrong? Are things going along more or less all right? Quite sustainable?”

“It’s a mess,” said Arbop carefully, “and we’re doomed.”

“Very likely. A tragedy, of course. The overwhelming likelihood is that humanity ends very, very badly and takes a lot of other species down with it. Is that an unfair assessment?”

“Sounds about right.”

“Well, there’s not much to be done about it.”

“I guess not.”

“Of course not. But if you could, and I mean this as pure theory only, pure hypothetical, if you could save some of the people, maybe even pick and choose your favourites, the sorts of people you’d like to see populating and taking care of the planet, if there was some magic way to do that, to start over with the best sorts of people, not the idiots, not the slaving greedheads, no, rather the sensitive and artistic ones and the ones who knew all about organic farming, who weren’t overly ambitious let’s say, if you could imagine a lovely cooperative world full of such people, wouldn’t that be the sort of thing that would be nice to imagine?”

“I don’t know.”

“What? Really? Are you afraid to imagine that?”

“No.”

“Well go on, imagine that for a minute, is it so terrible?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“There you go, let yourself imagine something nice! Goodness knows there’s enough ugliness, enough pain, pain you can’t possibly even stand. Give your mind a nice vacation. Relax and have something nice for a few moments.”

“It’s nice to imagine a world of nice people, yes. So what?”

“So nothing!”

“OK then.”

The two men gazed together down the darkened path ahead for some time.

“But it does follow in a way,” continued the man at last, “knowing that the terrible, unsustainable world is going to mean unimaginable pain and horror for



everyone anyway, it might make a certain amount of sense to do something that would clear things out a bit, start anew, lower the stress on resources, leave the planet for a manageable number of good people.”

“That does not follow.”

“Why not?”

“By definition, good people don’t do mass murder.”

“You’re right. Not if they’re sentimental.”

“What do you know about good people? I’m glad you’re not in charge of the world.”

“But the alternative is that everyone dies!”

“So they all die.”

“We,” corrected the man. “We all die.”

“So we all die.”

“Ah,” said the man. “That does sound a bit mass murderly though. You’re too good for this world, my tiny friend. Of course, I’m just like you really, only I let myself think of things. There are all kinds of incremental steps one could take, benevolent steps. If there were some sort of catastrophe of course, it could catalyse any number of ways to help the good people that are easy to get along with.”

“I have to go to the doctor.”

“I’ve made you ill.”

“Yes. Plus I’ve lost another toe.”

“Another one! How many in all now?”

“Like that’s your business.”

“Oh, not at all, excuse me.”

“Four.”

The man gave a low, appreciative whistle.

“It’s nothing,” said Arbop. “Just a little apoptosis or something, self-limiting. But I should get it checked.”

“We should, shouldn’t we, but we never do, do we?”

“No, but I’m going to.”

“It’s wise. I advise you to follow your own plan.”

Arbop nodded dismissively and began to walk away. The man retreated back into his recesses, whistling a deliberately eerie tune as a joke.

“Do be careful though if you go anywhere near the Civic Centre,” called out the man.

“Why’s that?” said Arbop, pausing.

“Termite central,” said the man. “I’ve been thinking of destroying it. But it’s entirely up to you, of course.”

The man’s startling words made Arbop realise that he could well have been dealing with an honest-to-goodness breacher. However, when he peered into the dark recess and shone his torch in, there was no man there.

Arbop went on, guided by his intent listening for the tiny sound of relentless chewing throughout the framework that surrounded him. Termites indeed. He chose an exit when he could no longer tell the difference between the sound of his own head and the presumed cacophony of vibrations, pheromones, foraging, cellulose digestion, and swarming. His location was immediately clear to him upon lifting the manhole cover. He was right by the Civic Centre, which was quite a stroke of luck or intuition, since he had intended to visit his doctor there at his earliest convenience anyway.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dear my brother Bodhamari whom I love,

Professor Woodrow Wilson once said that, should every man sent out from a university be obsessed by a sudden depression in which time reappears accompanied by friends who never venture a remark, they should suffer opposite the stove. The calculation of a human's capacity to make sense out of total war without resenting the ferocious beast of degraded reflection makes us shiver where all the women had crowded, allowed at last to relax in a bath of darkness. The repudiation of authentically reproduced space, of night nurses and puddles, maddened by exile, is our attitude towards peace and the unreal. Let us focus instead on irresistible Indifference, heavy walking through uncarpeted halls, the torturers of Budapest, the discipline of dogs. All of this is not unrelated to the safeguarding of human interests. Contemplating trades for consolation in possession of the rope, reversing the perspective, we see faces on the wall and stretch out our arms and move our fingers without the least hesitation. So it is with you and I.

Your severe historian,  
Oliver

"I'm very sorry for the inconvenience," said Arbop sincerely, looking at the doctor with moist and imploring eyes. "When I write back to him, I will be sure to advise him not to address his letters to me here. It's bad enough he contacts me at home."

Dr Bronofsky didn't reply directly, but only took a few notes. She then looked at Arbop's remaining toes and took careful note of the gaps where there had once been others. She compared her observations against her prior notes and ran a series of other tests of uncertain relevance: blood pressure, oxygen levels, ears and eyeballs and so forth. Arbop sat through it patiently, relieved to yield to the guidance of an expert.

"The odd thing is, of course," began Dr Bronofsky, "that different toes are missing this time. Some that were gone before are back, but the total number of missing toes is still greater overall."

“Surely not.”

“That is what my notes indicate.”

“Do you know I thought that was the case but I dismissed the idea as impossible.”

“That’s why I take notes.”

“It’s a good idea.”

Arbop paused here to think whether he should ask Dr Bronofsky if she were really not a medical doctor but a psychiatrist, and he was really bonkers, and the entire business about toes and letters was just some delusion he had that she liked to take notes on, and any reports of their appointments should be taken with a grain of salt unless they could be independently verified. But that would probably just make him sound crazy; he decided against it.

With exquisite pleasure, Arbop placed his toes in Bronofsky’s masterful fingers and succumbed to her expertise.

“Is there any pain or discomfort?” she asked.

“None,” answered Arbop. “I am extraordinarily tough. A lesser man would probably be writhing in agony.”

“Well,” said Dr Bronofsky with her no-nonsense eyebrows, “in medical matters we don’t always get as clear a picture of definite cause and effect as we would like, unfortunately. Uncertainty comes with the territory. Having said that, I don’t see anything to worry about here, particularly. There is no sign of infection, there’s no phalangeal gout, no subungal haematoma, no bleeding. This kind of thing does happen, sometimes, as we get older, just as you might get rosacea on your face, your teeth lose sensitivity, your brain shrinks, your memory becomes unreliable.

There's only so much we can do, apart from treating any pain and trying not to worry too much."

"I see," said Arbop. "Sometimes a toe will just go."

"A toe will go."

Arbop thanked her and gave her unwanted assurances that it was always a pleasure to see her, and she responded with a professional tight-lipped awkward non-smile that was neither friendly nor unfriendly. Arbop nipped his impulse to hug her in the bud.

When he emerged from the doctor's office and headed for the exit, Arbop's trained perimeter security eyes noticed several suspicious-looking bags that seemed to be placed at regular intervals along the Civic Centre corridor. He picked up one of the sacks and looked inside. What at first appeared to be a traditional cartoon bundle of dynamite with wires and a detonator turned out to be, on closer inspection, a bundle of hot dogs with wires and a detonator. They were good, plump, reddish hot dogs of evident quality, all beef by the look of them, not the pale skinny things one finds floating vertically in inappropriate jars in foreign supermarkets. The bag had writing on it. *Dakka Processed Foodstuffs*, it said in a large font. Smaller, as a subtitle, was *Budendeet Be Loverly*. With a question mark at the end.

The bags more or less fell within the purview of Arbop's capacity as a perimeter security man although he was well inside the city centre. In Arbop's view, perimeter security was not to be construed narrowly, but rather as a matter of protecting the citizens around whom the perimeter served as a security cordon. Whether these hardy little wieners represented some sort of situationist stunt-activism, a harmless prank, a frankfurter promotion scheme, or a genuine threat to society was a question best left to the professionals at a higher pay grade. Hot dogs

were always slightly amusing, fine, all right, of course, nobody eats one without an ironic half smile and a strong sense of the ridiculous, but there are reasons jokes about bombs aren't permitted at sensitive institutions. Arbop would do the responsible thing and proceed to HQ to report the incident.

He took the number 12 bus. On the way there, a number 12 going in the opposite direction approached. Arbop leaned keenly forward to observe its driver because there was something he wanted to see: the driver of the other number 12 waved at the driver of Arbop's number 12. Driver camaraderie. Arbop loved that. He sat back, satisfied. A bus and its mirror, connecting for a moment of fleeting joy.

"Anarchists," said G flatly, once Arbop had gotten to the office and handed him a sample bag to peek into.

They had already discussed the various possibilities, and G was conveying by his choice of word and his tone of voice that, whatever it meant and whoever was responsible, anarchy was the bottom line. The rest, the details, were more or less irrelevant. Artist, terrorist, prankster, huckster, take your pick. Anarchists, the lot of them. One of the things Arbop and G did not do was to get into a discussion of what anarchy means. Neither felt there was a need. G, for his part, had taken one of the hot dogs to the communal kitchenette and cooked it in the microwave oven. He had placed it on some white bread and applied a packet of ketchup. There was a small supply of such things in the cupboard.

"It's a good dog," said G, chewing.

After an initial hesitation, Arbop decided to have one too. He, too, thought it was good. The men chewed in silence, apart from the sound of the chewing.

Grimsby shifted against the wall in the background, and if you looked closely you could see him nodding. Then he seemed to get bigger and bigger, but it

was only because he was coming closer to the front of the room where Arbop and G were talking.

“Dakka Budendeet,” said Grimsby, startling everyone because he spoke so rarely. “It’s right on the bag.”

As to the next question, namely who or what was Dakka Budendeet, a person or a group, a rhythm, a vibe, an image, Grimsby had an answer: It was all of those things. And none of them.

“Like Alice Cooper,” said Arbop, nodding his own head and swallowing the last of his hot dog.

Neither Arbop nor G could later remember exactly how he had done it, but somehow Grimsby was able to convey that Dakka Budendeet had certainly breached the perimeter, just look at the name, it wasn’t local, and was responsible for the havoc that the city was lately experiencing, including the bodies and the left inferior frontal gyri. The left inferior what, Arbop and G will have asked. The left inferior frontal gyri, Broca’s area, in the frontal lobe of the cerebral cortex, specifically extracted from all of the victims, well that’s certainly a piece of news, nobody needs an investigation, we know who did it, Dakka Budendeet, Dakka Budendeet, Dakka Buden, Dakka Buden, Dakka Budendeet, it all made sense, the same mad surgical murderer was clearly behind all of them and up to more besides, wobbling monuments, stolen statues, hot dog bombs, what next, were they building a massive *gyrus frontalis inferior* from spare parts with capabilities that could only be imagined by itself?

Arbop wondered about meeting whoever was behind all this alarming activity and having to decide what to do next. Would they be gigantic brutes? Wiry elusive types who generally stood half sideways? He decided to imagine that they’d

be counter-intuitively elderly and kind, tunnel-dwelling tea-sippers with a reasonable explanation and a ready wit. Nevertheless, their canny charm quite aside, it would be his job to take them in to answer for everything, them and their twinkling eyes and a relaxed warm way of laughing. Their leader would propose something ingenious, like a wrestling match, and if Arbop could beat him in a wrestling match then he'd go quietly and turn himself in. Arbop would suspect trickery, or that he'd turn out to be deceptively strong and nimble, a judo expert. The truth would be that Arbop would have no chance of winning, just like when he discovered his street's biggest bully sitting on top of his best friend and slapping him, that time as a child when he didn't think but just dove at the bully, dove at him and got on top against what everyone believed, a victory that was entirely real but totally implausible, the seconds that elapsed afterwards lasting a long time as everyone slowly understood that what had happened was not possible, the bubble skin of reality had been breached, the fight went out of Arbop, the bully tossed him off, the rupture resealed, although the bully had cried, everyone had cried. Order was restored, but for the memory of the tears. A long time ago, to be sure, that was then, this bore only the most tangential relationship to that.

Arbop seized hold of his fantasy and imagined that no, it was no judo expert, it was just a feeble old man after all, and Arbop would defeat him practically instantly. The match would be over within five seconds and the man would give up by crying "I give up!" and whatever crowd might have gathered would suddenly look at Arbop like *he* was the big bully, even though Dakka Budendeet in its nebulous entirety would proclaim that it was the old man's idea and Arbop was only indulging him. It would do no good. The man's shoulder would be hurt. He'd get up rubbing it, looking wounded in the feelings. Arbop had been unnecessarily rough.



Had he expected the slight fellow to be a judo expert? He was an old man, for god's sake! Everyone would boo as Arbop frog-marched the man into the judicial system. Pig! They would hurl the word, chant it. Videos of the event would go viral and he would end up widely loathed. Arbop would be red-faced and have nothing to say for himself, just shame and resentment and explanations that nobody wanted to listen to. And it would probably turn out to be the wrong man, a huge misunderstanding, the attacks would continue, the hot dogs would be packed with trinitrotoluene or ammonium nitrate. Probably hot dogs already had ammonium nitrate in them anyway, didn't they have all sorts of nitrates and nitrites? One would only probably have to jiggle one to set it off. He probably shouldn't have eaten one. How sad and stupid the world was. How unfair and tragic and ridiculous.

Arbop took a therapy session involving simulated drowning and the painful stimulation of his testicles by electric current. It was perhaps invigorating, but when Arbop got home he found himself more agitated than ever. He scarcely exchanged eye contact with Yaro on his way in, pushing open his own door with great force, even unnecessarily great. He didn't see the sympathetic look she gave him initially, nor how her face resumed its resigned quality after only a few seconds. His home was empty. He looked down upon his tiny city on his bedroom floor and felt a wrath with neither source nor object.

He lifted his knee high up to his shoulder and stomped straight down on the Civic Centre, flattening it completely. He leaned in close to survey the damage, felt the pull of whispers, a rush that quickly built up into a maelstrom, and got sucked in.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The helicopter had lifted off normally but soon malfunctioned. Arbop wanted it to have happened in slow motion so he could be sure he had seen it, and seen it in every detail, but in the event it all happened so swiftly one was left wondering whether one had really seen anything and what really was the true source of the black smoke. His brain replayed it for him. The helicopter lifted off normally and soon malfunctioned; it tilted and wheeled and crashed and burned and then there was black smoke. Had it been shot down? No. There had been no shooting. No guns, no missiles. No enemy. No mistakes. His brain replayed it for him. Most of it had only been passed over the optic chiasm from the corner of his eye, subject to an inordinate amount of vitreous distortion, an over-reliance on rod cells, shadow ghosts. This was therefore a reconstruction of shifty low-resolution images that might possibly have been merely butterflies and beads of sweat. It seemed however that the helicopter had lifted off normally but then tilted and dropped. Maybe it could be made to have not happened. Had there been a sound? He ran towards the black smoke. He was crying. It had lifted off normally.

Several other soldiers ran with him towards the smoke, so it must have been one of them who tackled Arbop and pinned him to the ground when he tried to dive into the burning debris. No words were needed because everyone knew everything there was to know. The others knew that Arbop's brother had been on board, and Arbop knew that everyone knew everyone on board. Everybody knew how everyone felt, each individual knew his feelings were understood by everyone else, and everyone knew that there had been a few thousand similar incidents and that helicopters just crashed sometimes and that you couldn't find a soldier who hadn't lost somebody. Did that make anybody feel better? Actually, it did in a way. You

wouldn't wish it on anyone but, absolved of that responsibility and handed the condition as an irredeemable given, being alone separately as part of a group of omni-connected void-dwellers had its comforts.

The thing was, the helicopter had lifted off normally before malfunctioning. There was a peripheral plummeting of some sort, a dark streak, and then there was black smoke in a column. A monument to black smoke. Up. Over. Down. Smoke. It had certainly lifted off all right. He had given that part his full attention. That was the vivid part, all cone cells and reliable neural replays. Something must have broken.

Eventually he was allowed to go closer. Eventually they all went closer and saw everything and got the crispy blackened bodies out, broken macabre puppets made out of barbecue left-overs. Everyone could be identified, that's what dog tags were good for. Arbop wasn't crying any more. He spent some time looking at Oliver, looking him up and down, looking him right in the face.

"Battle sweats," he whispered to what remained. "You'll be all right. I'm here now."

Arbop zombie-helped with the bagging and loading, numb. Then he went for a walk.

He staggered into the town proper and through the sun-blind alleys and heard the people and their children, heard the things they moved and the rhythms of their conversations, the pitches rising and falling, heard their laughter. He fell flat against white walls and groped for tunnels and the company of people who had managed to grow old. He hunkered down and hugged his knees and looked at the shadows of birds flitting across the cobbles. Suddenly he felt the urge to run as fast as possible, to expend himself in energy, to go so fast that he left himself behind bit by bit in a

dissipating trail of cartoon blur until he disappeared in a smear and left nothing. So he did. He got up and ran.

His run was disappointingly lacking in speed and distance, a fine mockery of his intention that left him hanging breathlessly onto the handle of some throbbing steel door. There weren't any steel doors in this town — a stimulating mystery — so he yanked the handle down and pulled it open, challenging it to prove its existence and function. It was dark inside but for flashing lights, and the music was at physical force level.

The crowd had formed a circle around ten short dancing men with no necks and keratin faces. Arbop had to laugh along with everyone at the charming way they wiggled to and fro. They departed to joyful applause and euphoria.

Arbop felt two hands come around from behind him and cover his eyes.

"Guess who?" came the familiar voice of his own wife, Effie.

He smiled and turned to see her face, also smiling, and the two of them smiled at each other a moment before kissing.

"We were just starting to think you weren't going to make it," came another familiar voice.

Arbop laughed when he saw his brother Oliver standing there, already handing him a drink.

"I had trouble finding the place!" said Arbop. "The door isn't even marked!"

"Oh I wouldn't go to a club with a marked door," said Oliver. "That's the first rule of cool, my brother."

Arbop noticed the Keratin Mob snaking its way across the crowded floor. At the front of the line, moving fast, was a man with a small, clenched face and an angry grey suit, bent slightly forward as he walked, like Groucho Marx.

“Look!” said Arbop, pointing at the briskly walking figure. “What would you name that man!”

“Grimsby!” ventured Effie, with a laugh.

“Yes!” said Arbop, jaw dropped in amazement. “That’s exactly what I was thinking!”

“That’s a Grimsby all right,” agreed Oliver, sealing the deal.

So it was a Grimsby followed by ten Keratin Boys, and taking up the rear was a striking fellow with mismatched ears and eyebrows and a drastic scar that ran diagonally across the length of his face.

“I know him, too,” said Arbop more quietly. “I can’t think why.”

“That’ll be your hindbrain talking,” said Effie.

“Trust it,” said Oliver.

Arbop wanted to see what they were up to so he led the way after them, across the densely packed ballroom. There was a lot of shouldering and angling and sliding involved, but they managed to stay close together, the three of them, and go through a doorway, into a corridor, around a corner, and finally arrive at a door that could have been the door to a janitor’s closet.

“This is the mayor’s war room,” said Arbop. “Hang on.”

Arbop had realised that he was carrying a Mil-Tec Army Patrol Assault Camouflage Modular Lightweight Load-Carrying Equipment Backpack and that it was going to be useful. He took it off, set it on the ground, and opened it. The thing

was full of gas masks. He took three out and kicked the bag as hard as he could down the hallway.

“Ta da!” he laughed. “We’ll want these.”

They put on the gas masks and smiled. Arbop turned the knob confidently and pushed the door open. Smoke billowed out, and when it had cleared sufficiently they could see Strongman Simms sitting in there at his desk, surrounded by the dozen men they had seen march across the entire ballroom to get there. Effie made the face she always made whenever anybody near her smoked a cigarette, and turned to Arbop to give him the thumbs-up sign for the gas masks.

“Good call,” she said, because it’s perfectly possible to talk and be heard while wearing a modern gas mask, and Oliver joined in the giving of the thumbs-up signal.

“Get in!” said the Strongman. “Sit down, you’re letting the smoke out.”

They went in and took places at the back of the room behind the assembled gang. Simms kept smoking and they kept the gas masks on. The Keratin Mob, Simms, and Grimsby huddled together closely and murmured. The man with the scar listened at an indefinite angle.

“I’ve got a question!” shouted Arbop because he felt awkward, he and his cohorts being in the room yet excluded from all the murmuring.

“Question in the back!” acknowledged Simms.

“Yeah, what’s the mayor doing murmuring with the Keratin Mob in a back room at the Civic Centre?”

Effie and Oliver did some murmuring of their own, in support of Arbop’s fearless question. The man with the scar and the ears put his hands up in the “I’m innocent” gesture.

“I’m just here to advise on tunnel access,” said the man.

“Really?” said Arbop. “My Effie is a steamfitter.”

“It’s a great career,” the man said approvingly. “You’re paid to train and then the salary is well above average. Always in demand, steamfitters.”

“Listen,” said Simms, cigar in his mouth as he came hustling around his desk with his arms out to shoo them out of the room, “it’s nothing I need to detain you with, see? It’s a fireproofing job on the building core, there’s nothing more boring. If we need any steamfitters can I call you? Great. Go on now, shoo.”

The Strongman shooed Arbop, Effie, and Oliver all out of the room as if with a whisk broom and shut the door. They all took off their gas masks and hurled them as far as they could down the corridor.

“I know how to get out the top,” said Arbop.

The matter was thereby settled and the group of them wended their way back through the crowds largely unnoticed on their way to the elevator. When they got to the top floor, Arbop provided a leg-up for Effie to clamber through the hatch at the top, then Oliver provided a leg-up for Arbop to climb through, then Effie and Arbop reached down and pulled Oliver up until he could climb out too. Then they were in a space and there was a ladder and another hatch and then they were out, on the roof of the Civic Centre, looking out at the city in the cool night air.

It was not a very tall building, but it was a humble city, not full of skyscrapers; the view was exhilarating enough. It is always peaceful on rooftops, a function of surveying life from a physical meta-perspective. Rooftops have a calming effect, unless bombers are coming or the tiles are crumbling or you are being hurled off. Nothing of the kind was happening in this instance, and the party raging below ground was a subliminal thumping from these heights, only loud

enough to stimulate awareness of distance and superior elevation. From the top of a mere six storeys, cars become toylike and people's tiny fragility is clear. But one's eyes are drawn mainly to horizons from heights, towards the expansive vision denied to those pitiable miniature others down below. Only Oliver had remembered to bring a drink, which he chivalrously offered to share with Effie, who declined, ew, germs. Arbop put his hands in his pockets and squinted eastward. The air was crisp indeed. The planet Venus hung like a small three-dimensional pearl among a sparse collection of stars. From a kilometre away, a car horn was heard faintly to honk as thin clouds raced across the face of the moon. They were up there for long enough to forget the Keratin Mob and Simms and smoke-filled rooms.

The boom from the basement came with an unbalancing jolt that seemed to magnify its already loud sound, far louder than anything produced as yet by the DJ. The sound system itself stopped, and the silence had a worrisome quality. The three friends looked at each other and felt suddenly vulnerable. The next blasts came from closer and dropped them into free fall. What a ride! They descended towards the rising explosions until finally they became part of the billowing cloud of pulverised concrete and bone as the entire building gave up its third dimension and became flat.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Arbop stood up and stared at the crushed Civic Centre with a mixture of regret and defiance. It had taken him a long time, not only to build it, but to carve the details and paint it. Now, shattered into constituent segments, it lay quite flat. It could be rebuilt, of course, but it would never be exactly the same. Perhaps that was for the best. In any case, it had felt good to destroy it. Arbop felt free of it and considered destroying the rest of the city while he was at it. There would be plenty of time for that; he would let it stand for now. It would stand at his pleasure. He heard sirens in the distance, but then there were often sirens in the distance.

It wasn't long before he knew what everyone else knew before long, which was that the Civic Centre had really collapsed in real life. The destruction was total and sudden. One moment it had stood. The next moment it was flat. It was obviously very surprising, but apparently these things do happen and everyone would just have to get used to it, unless they wanted to try saying that it didn't happen, in which case the onus would be on them. Buildings aren't what they used to be — well, this one certainly wasn't. It was the city of dreams, innumerable movies had said so. If there was one thing everyone knew about dreams, it was that things could be one way one second and totally different the next without intervening causes and effects.

Arbop decided to go into town. It was in some respects a quirky or even foolish decision, or in any case one that many other people chose not to make. When buildings start to collapse, one really does not know what might happen next. Would that be the only building to go, or would there be others? Would it ultimately be all the buildings? During what time frame? Would people, by the end of the day or the year or their lives, look back fondly on that brief time they had believed only one building would improbably flatten? There would be well-informed people who took

comfort in their understanding of the odds, who knew about the lack of guarantees, that some percentage of innocent hot showers turned into a loss of balance, slipped into some sort of skull crack, a cabbage-brained life of inscrutable opacity, and didn't let it worry them. Anyone who feels perfectly safe is delusional, but then anyone who walks around aware of the constant danger is mad. Delusion has its privileges. But of course it all depends on the particulars. The fact is that there were many people whose instincts led them to want to be anywhere but close to the disaster zone, and Arbop was not one of them. Arbop wanted to get right up next to it because otherwise it would never seem real. He wanted to see it with his own eyes and smell it with his own nose.

There was no more than the usual amount of push-back from Yaro about the day pass. They went through the comical routine they sometimes went through, copped from Bugs Bunny, where Yaro said no and Arbop said yes and they repeated it four or five times and then Arbop switched to no and Yaro said yes, and they'd repeat that a few times until Arbop said OK, if you absolutely insist, it's a yes. I'll take the pass. It was a mutually amusing way of managing the intolerable nature of their relationship. He could also really pretend to have tricked her and she could really pretend not to be entirely responsible for the decision.

Before he actually set out, Arbop checked to make sure all his trousers and button shirts were still in the closet, all his t-shirts, underpants, and socks neatly folded in their drawers. He wanted to be specifically certain of their whereabouts in case any similar items were to turn up in a way that could and might be used against him in a court of law. On his way to the subway, he noticed that his shoes had developed a very loud squeak, most likely because he had trodden in a puddle. Only one foot had gone in the puddle and both shoes squeaked, but never mind. He

squeaked along getting increasingly self conscious. By the time he arrived at the subway station, he had taken to making a variety of unnecessary other noises just to cover the squeaking. So he altered his walking style, to scrape his foot audibly as he moved, and took to sniffing and coughing and snapping his fingers and flapping the material of his light jacket. On the stairs, which he took instead of the escalator for a little exercise, Arbop found himself on a collision course with a fellow who was hell bent on clinging to that particular lane. Arbop let out a sarcastic “excuse *me*” as he went around him and thought: *mad bastard*. What kind of maniacally worm-driven, scissor-eyed jackal just bores his relentless way through a public thoroughfare like everyone else was just a ghost? It was still only beginning to dawn on Arbop that someone else had gotten out of *his* way moments earlier on the same stairs, when he arrived on the platform and found a crazy woman there.

She was haranguing a man in an official jacket about the discrepancy between loudspeaker announcements, which boasted of a normal service running to schedule, and the electronic sign, which said that the next train was not for seven minutes. Laughing with ostentatious incredulity, she pointed out in the sharpest possible tones that a seven-minute delay was hardly normal on a Tuesday morning, hardly good service running to schedule. It’s nowt to do with me, pet, said the man, despite his official jacket. She laughed derisively, even more loudly, practically spitting on him, anyone could picture that. The man happened to be standing right next to the emergency phone, which instead of a dial or a number pad had one big red button to push in order to connect. The phone was mounted on a box so large and yellow that nobody had ever noticed it before. The woman snatched the phone while staring defiantly at the man with whom it had nowt to do, and pushed the big red button.

While she shouted into the phone about how objectionable it was for announcements to indicate different things on different media, one could hear the tiny voice of the person whose job it was to respond to calls from people who pushed the button. The tiny voice asked if there was an emergency.

“No! This is a complaint!” said the woman.

She apologised for being so stroppy, not in a sincere way, but only so that she could then get even stroppier. Her complaint was that they ought to stop broadcasting that message about service being normal when what was happening was so clearly not normal. *You call this normal?! The man in the official jacket* risked a quick amused glance at Arbop and they exchanged facial expressions that fleetingly featured eyebrows raising, eyes slightly widening, and lips being drawn tightly downward. Arbop expected the tiny voice would decline to engage, on the grounds that it was not an emergency, probably by redirecting the woman to a completely different complaints line for which she’d need her own phone and a far more sustained interest in the matter.

But that is not what happened. The tiny voice, which was also female, seemed well practiced in receiving calls of a non-emergency and aggressively unhappy nature, and Arbop imagined having her job. He admired the way the voice, during the moments in which it had a turn to speak, not only remained patient and polite, but evinced genuine concern. The woman’s tiny disembodied voice explained in an apologetic tone that sometimes the electronic time estimates went a bit screwy, but that the verbal announcements represented real human activity and were generally reliable. At this bit of information, the complainant let out another shriek of stabbing laughter and offered to send a text message directly to the voice’s superior, would that be possible, would it be preferable, would it?

Then the train came, and it had not been seven but only perhaps three minutes, albeit particularly long ones.

“I have to go, my train is here,” said the woman, as if to imply *so you can keep your meaningless nonsense*. She slammed the receiver down onto its cradle.

As Arbop got onto the train, he glanced at the phone because he wanted to verify that it was, as he assumed, a line for emergencies, which he could only think implied ruffians on the loose, or, who knows, something important suddenly collapsing into pure flatness. Indeed it was officially labelled an emergency line. However, someone — maybe a loose ruffian — had also vandalised it with a permanent marker, writing: Are You Insane? Call Now!

Perhaps the use of the phone for the release of built-up pressure was well known. Maybe it had even been installed by a steamfitter. Maybe the woman using the phone was really a performance artist, seizing on the graffiti'd invitation to practice her craft. Perhaps the man in the official jacket was her husband and they were a double act. The possibilities were numerous, the realities, as always, perfectly fungible.

Arbop arrived at the Civic Centre to find it cordoned off at a respectful perimeter on all sides. It was still smouldering. There were emergency vehicles everywhere, men and women doing emergency things like hooking up hoses, spraying water, talking on two-way radios, treating people who were in shock. There was very little to see of the building itself, as it was entirely horizontal in two dimensions — one looked at what was not there, and at what one could see because of what was not there — but Arbop could feel the heat from where he stood some distance away. If he had gone there to make it seem more real, he had failed. It still felt like a dream.

People will have died.

He tried to let that sink in, tried to imagine it in horrifying detail, the split second between terror and nothingness, tried to make that feel real. Failed again. It felt emptily cinematic. Arbop began to walk around the perimeter to get different angles on the absence while he pondered what had happened and tried to remember what it had looked like before. Squeak, squeak, squeak. Goddamned shoes.

It wasn't just his squeaky shoes though, something else was bothering him. Once it came into focus it was obvious what he had been ignoring all along: His feet felt funny. Arbop sat himself down on the nearest bench and confirmed his urgent dread. They were all gone, all ten of them, leaving no stumps, neither blood nor scab nor scar, just a smooth surface with a silken texture that seduced the fingertip. There were no toe signs, nor any sign of prior toe. These feet wanted, by all appearances, to be this way. Nothing about them cried deformity or unhappiness; they had accepted themselves and redefined an ideal. Perhaps it was time Arbop accepted them too, or so the thought crossed his mind, but still it felt like capitulation. Of course, it seemed obvious now, but he'd been walking funny too, as one would, it made perfect sense. He could learn to do it better, that was obvious as well, who hadn't heard stories from other cultures, stories involving foot binding, possibly in olden times, perhaps it had actually happened, of course it's true that people tell all kinds of stories and if you weren't there you can never be certain, and even photographs can be doctored, but who was to say it hadn't happened, and if we know anything it is that anything that can be imagined has been tried by somebody somewhere. Arbop was sure that if anyone could manage to adapt to a new style of walking it would be Chinese women who had suffered foot-binding, he had nothing but faith in their reserves of strength and their dignity. They would be his models. If

they could do it, they could serve as his light in the darkness and he too would strive for a similar adaptation with a similar dignity. It's not like losing your head in places where they chop your head off, there's no rebounding from that, not like being suddenly squashed or even losing your identity and your rights in various places, we've heard the stories, the nightmarish stories about places that don't seem the least bit real but you can be sure they exist, somebody will have tried that too, whatever it is, somebody somewhere, bet your bottom dollar.

Naturally, yes, Arbop would see the doctor again if he could find her and she was still alive and hadn't been reduced to steam and microscopic slivers. He hoped he wouldn't have to start all over again with a new doctor as if there were no such thing as history, no such thing as having been through something and learned from it, having ruled out a few dead ends, narrowed things down, moved things forward. What a dreary prospect, explaining how there once had been toes, how they had come and gone and arbitrarily — good Jesus Frankenstein to say nothing of his inability to reiterate the medical terminology Dr Bronofsky had used! He'd be at square one, possibly facing an ironically detached new doctor who was likely to offer him patronising smiles of infuriating condescension, a doctor who'd more likely declare him insane and try to institutionalise him in a hall of mirrors and useless emergency phones than offer a crisp diagnosis and a plan. What a day this was turning out to be.

Arbop was startled to find a spider on his shoulder, to all appearances serenely observing him, and when he looked up he saw another three, dangling above him on slender lines of strong web thread, poised to drop, to plunge into what they would have to presume was an abyss, the abyss of Arbop himself. He posed no threat to the spiders, of course, he loved them and would do them no harm. But

could they know that? Would it be a wise gamble on their part? The urge to comfort and offer a sense of not-aloneness to others in pain is not the exclusive purview of humanity, nor is it strictly an intra-species phenomenon, this much is known as a certainty, one can even find video evidence of the most unlikely forms of assistance, even from nominal predator to nominal prey.

All else aside, Arbop did not welcome the thought of being dropped upon by spiders regardless of their intentions. The first thing he did was to get out from beneath them, somewhat awkwardly being unsure of his toeless mobility skills, and the second thing was gently to remove the fragile visitor from his shoulder and to hobble over to let him loose on a small square of urban grass in the midst of which a tree grew as if in a strait jacket or a tiny prison.

Unfortunately, on his way to the tree, he stepped on a snail. Normally, like anyone else, Arbop wouldn't be toppled by squashing a snail, but this time he had no toes. Furthermore, it was still daylight, and he was out and about, whereas normally it was slugs, night, and kitchen. Therefore there was an especially unnerving quality to the incident, which was likely to have contributed to Arbop landing on his bottom and looking at the wreckage exactly as if it were his own tiny block city. Before standing up, he took time to examine the damage quite ruefully. Real people will have died there. What must it have been like in there at the critical moment? It had all the signs of impotence, futility, improbability, all crashing down as a terrible, sudden surprise. He got the sickening feeling that everything was just falling to pieces all at once, but he resisted the urge to start crying like a child. However, he missed childhood.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Feast of the Pulmonata was in full swing, which is not to imply that it ever got terribly raucous or that there was music or laughter or dancing. Nobody was hanging from any chandeliers or making any ribald toasts. No, it was a lot of slow, steady chewing and it went on for a long time measured at a pace that would be unbearable even to a languorous Frenchman dining late on a Saturday. There was at best an inchoate Dionysian gluttony in the subdued ecstasy the masticators derived from the near-certainty that not a single leaf of chard would escape their rasping denticles.

It was time to select a martyr — a slug of course. The elderly snail leader surveyed the moistened masses and considered them one by glistening one. In keeping with a tradition many hundreds of years old, a tradition handed down from the time when the Aztec ruled the rivers and terraces, and the Pulmonata, it is said, spoke Nahuatl, the most beautiful among them, the strongest and most glorious, would be chosen. *In truth*, mused the leader, *one is much like another*.

In such cases one must simply take a more fine-grained approach, zoom in for a close-up as it were. There is variance after all in length and circumference, and some suffer visibly from desiccation while others exude a luscious viscosity. In a way that is difficult to quantify, some have a more pleasing and shapely pneumostome, and certainly some have a mucus coating that is more uniformly hygroscopic than others. Furthermore it would have to be admitted that certain slugs had a superior and more alluring velvety mantle, sporting for example a proud ridged keel with lipped edges relentlessly suggesting the chatoyant and fertile puckering below. One dank and succulent limacoide did stand out in its voluptuous magnificence upon sufficient magnifying reflection, a particularly juicy specimen,

still tragically young but gnawed, apophallated, and all the more tantalising for it. This little wodger had been around the block a few times, proud but commanding of respect, widely admired with the passions of the soil, yet still, after all, a baby, at once innocent and worldly.

Perfection.

The tiny faerie historians announced the decision of the elder, causing a great wave of trembling and small jiggles. Young Plumpus was celebrated and adored, encircled, penetrated, fed and rubbed, sung to, sung of, mythologised, and the way before him was slimed, the better for him to follow the path to the kitchen floor where he would lurk ennobled by darkness and await the smudge he would become.

The euphoria of excess was in the air, in the soil, in the roots of everything that grew. A sacred shiver ran through them all, snail and slug alike. This was tradition, not madness, and all knew that some, and none could say which, would soon run amok. Glory! Luxury! These could be found no longer in acquisition but in the expenditure, the useless and extravagant and violent expenditure of the energy of riches. Yes, the one would go in all his sacrificial representation, but it only released rather than sated the divine frenzy, the pure negation of profane things. Immolation! Squander! A fever for competitive humiliation had been released, a total abandonment to the cause of lost intimacy. Let us eat something stimulating, they thought, slug and snail alike, let us do something shocking. Let us do it, however, in our own way, that is, very slowly. And so they set upon the Osagi cabbage, wanting only to be surprised, to experience the newness of the now, to give themselves to it completely, forever in every instant.

Arbop and Effie had brought a picnic to the garden, some cooked potatoes, bread, and bacon, to be supplemented by herbs and lettuces that they would pick

right there on site. In such ways the garden became not just a place of earnest labour but also a place of contemplation and enjoyment, a place to breathe, a way to get off the clock, an essential part of the strategy for a style of urban living that didn't spiral into confusion, loneliness, and insanity. No sooner had they broken out with the food than they sensed the approaching statesmanlike footsteps of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. A calming wave seemed to precede him, assuring everyone in its catchment that everything was all right. Let events unfold as they will, it seemed to say, only experience the courage that derives from yielding to the sovereign moment with serenity and joy.

"Just passing by," said Kennedy with a broad smile, holding his hand out for shaking. "Got a bit of weeding to do on my own plot. I've been remiss, I really have, it all gets out of control quite quickly. Anyway I wouldn't want to interrupt such a fantastically romantic moment. Picnic in the garden, eh, that's the life isn't it? Have you brought wine? Is wine allowed?"

They had not brought wine, although they presumed it would be allowed within reason so long as they didn't get drunk and become unpleasant and irresponsible about it. It was only lunchtime. Arbop and Effie tended to have their wine in the evening, when they didn't have so many hours ahead during which sleepiness would be inconvenient. They insisted on President Kennedy joining them, however, with everyone understanding and enjoying the fact that it was what all of them wanted. Effie made the president a sandwich, which he savoured with exaggerated delight.

"You know what we ought to do one day?" said Kennedy. "Barbecue. We could bring one of those small, portable grills. That would be allowed, wouldn't it? Chicken and burgers? Arbop looks like a burger man. Now Effie, I don't know.

You'll want to try my spicy Caribbean style jerk veggies. On a skewer? With Jackie's yogurt-scallion sauce? Sublime. Sublime! All this must come to pass."

Kennedy's presence at the allotment had had a number of salutary effects on both the community and the produce. Everyone just seemed happier. Babs had stopped threatening everyone and pulling stunts, having been mollified by Kennedy's adopted habit of doing her small favours — extracting her horsetail, sharing his manure, doing a bit of edge work. He had even helped Arbop with his stem rot problem by providing him with seeds of resistant bean species, explaining the role of zero-tillage and crop rotation, and recommending an eco-friendly combination of natural fungal and bacterial antagonists to suppress mycelial growth and carpogenic germination specific to apothecia.

The three of them — Arbop, Effie, and John F Kennedy — were still sitting on a bench by Arbop's shed eating bacon and fresh greens on baguettes when Grimsby appeared, covered from head to foot in soil and smiling. Grimsby was one of those people who looked worse when they smiled. His face at rest was somewhat unnerving. Smiling, it became a lurid mask of shudders. The effect was not lessened by his suit of damp loam. Grimsby had gone down the hole in Babs' garden and he looked it. He had lived as one with the soil, ingratiating himself with its creatures, seeking influence. The faerie historians of the Pulmonata had shunned him, but he had tuned in to their ways. His thoughts infused, drifted, perturbed, altered through the silt and ash of subterfuge and manipulation, diffusion, chelation, a capillary action, propaganda by weed.

"Well look what the cat dragged in," observed Kennedy jovially.

"Sandwich?"

Their combined attention was drawn, however, to a scuttling near the small pear tree. Little pink things with faces like hard visors, perhaps eight or ten in all, were breaching, diving, and scrabbling across the soil like a pod of tiny terrestrial dolphins. They went in for good and disappeared just by the tomatoes, but before anybody could even remark upon how like toes they seemed, a larger disturbance made itself apparent.

The chard, clearly, had been massively set upon. It heaved with glistening invertebrate madness. An advance contingent of slugs had already started in on the Osagi cabbages and were lustily devouring them, giving no sign whatsoever that they had a care for who saw.

“Is it just me,” asked Effie, “or do they seem unusually intense today?”

“They’re ravenous!” exclaimed Arbop. “Look at them go!”

“For a good three minutes now,” said Kennedy, rising to his full height, “I have watched this grim and disheartening display of obsessive consumption cast its pall over what by all rights should be nothing less than a lush and fecund idyll of contentment. The excesses of this sordid structure of greed and illicit diversions that unfold before us today flaunt the high traditions of honour and integrity of the great and essential activity of gardening. In any area of endeavour, there are always those whose venality will triumph over all the forces of opinion. In the words of Judge Learned Hand, ‘There can be no ambiguity in the answer of those who are worthy of the traditions and power of a noble calling.’ We must isolate the unethical and the unscrupulous, and leave them standing alone, cast out by the informal order to which they lay claim.”

Arbop and Effie looked at each other and shrugged.

“Yeah,” sighed Effie.

Grimsby was by then already gone, but some of the slugs, overwhelmed by nausea and hallucinations as if it were Pont-Saint-Esprit all over again, no longer satisfied even by the brain cabbage of Osagi, feeling like they were shrinking into fire and serpents, cast their stalks in the direction of the tall, imposing figure of JFK, beheld the pulsing at his temples, and hungered.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I found this,” said Arbop, hoisting the black bin bag up and plopping it wetly onto the counter before G at CPP HQ. “In one of the tunnels.”

When Arbop was a child he dreamed of having a network of tunnels to go everywhere. Next to his bed would be a secret door that would open and in he would climb, then he’d go all around the house invisibly and be able to appear anywhere, mystifying everyone. A hatch into the kitchen. A hatch into the living room, behind the couch maybe. Then out of somewhere, maybe down in the basement, there’d be an outlet into a wider network. He could get to school through it, for example, just turn up suddenly, amaze everybody. Where’d Arbop come from? Hey, where’d Arbop go? Where else might he turn up? The five and dime, with a little pocket change for some chocolate? The basketball courts in the park near the sump? China? But you couldn’t just have a tunnel straight to China and expect to drop straight through it. You could only drop to the centre of the earth, but then you’d stop falling, you’d have to, because it would all be up from there. You’d float there and you’d have to climb all the way up to China. Also, like every ten-year-old boy, Arbop knew even at the time that the core of the earth was a super hot iron-nickel alloy. His tunnels would need a futuristic transport system, able to withstand temperatures of up to six thousand degrees celsius through both solid and liquid metals. Fine. He imagined all of this easily. Job done. As for escaping from trouble, well, the system would be ideal. It could even include explosive distractions. Having turned everyone’s heads, Arbop could slip into the nearest tunnel entrance — they would be everywhere — and be gone. Even if somebody found an entrance, which would be immensely unlikely, they’d never trace him. There would be thousands of tunnels in the network, mostly leading to dead ends, with no signs and Arbop the

only boy alive who knew by imperceptible means and insider knowledge which holes led anywhere. He would be the undisputed king of hide and seek.

“What were you doing in the tunnels?” asked G.

Arbop explained his feeling that everything was in the tunnels. How could the perimeter be breached, the monuments be wobbled, the Civic Centre destroyed, Dakka Budendeet roam free, effects without causes, movement without detection, crime without inspection? Tunnels.

G peeked in the bag and quickly closed it back up.

“Yeesh,” he said, because the bag was full of moist and wibbly left inferior frontal gyri, evidently surgically extracted.

“There were a lot more bags,” said Arbop. “But they’re heavy.”

“Let’s get back in there,” said G. “Take me with you.”

Arbop recognised the eagerness in G’s tone of voice and became reflective.

“What’s the matter?” asked G. “You don’t want to go back down?”

“No no, I like the tunnels,” said Arbop. “It kind of reminds me of, ahh, forget it.”

“Being a kid.”

“Yeah man, exactly.”

Both of them felt a small impulse to hug each other, but they contented themselves with a shared moment of nodding while their invisible tendrils interconnected warmly.

There are wild places in the city that most people don’t know about or don’t see even when they’re looking at them. Arbop led the way to an abandoned reservoir halfway between HQ and the perimeter. The place was overgrown, having been out of operation for more than sixty years. Herons and pheasants lived there now, and



urban warblers. Large rabbits watched the men approach, some reluctantly hopping out of the way, others looking like they were contemplating starting a fight.

Down a short slope and into the dry old efflux chamber, Arbop lifted a hatch and lowered himself in. G followed. They went down a long spiral staircase into the reservoir gatehouse, cool and damp, walls of brick gone whitish like bad potatoes. That led out into a much larger space, a tunnel some ten metres wide and fifteen high, with walls of stone giving way to a curved brick ceiling arching overhead. The floor was concrete, but covered in a layer of silt and paint chips, and thin metal pipes ran above the stone work with bright naked lightbulbs every thirty feet. They didn't know where they were going; they meandered, taking branches at random, enjoying the lack of destination. The first thing they lost was any sense of time and space. Soon after, they lost any sense of purpose or meaning. If they discovered something useful, it would probably ruin the mood. They were quite happy to wander in a world beyond professional responsibilities. The tunnels had a way of making their wanderers go native.

Once in a while an opening would appear in a wall and lead not into another tunnel but into a cave-like room, or even a suite of rooms. The first several of these were empty, but created a sense of hope that they'd find somebody at home sooner or later. In one of them they even found a table with a half a bowl of soup still on it, steam rising, chair pulled back as if someone might return to it at any moment, but no other way out and nobody in sight.

After somewhere between an hour and a week they found a small room lit by a single lamp, with a single chair in which an elderly woman was reading a nouveau roman in translation. She peered up at them over the top of her glasses and smiled. They simply moved on and felt like policemen.

In an eventual other room a yoga class was going on. The teacher gave them a look that made them feel perverted for observing so they moved on again after nodding officially.

They were very happy to come upon a mobile coffee stand run by a gentleman who seemed quick witted and full of stories. They paused there for a rest and a cappuccino, and the proprietor offered them some of the latest journals, full of articles he always hoped his patrons would read and discuss.

“You should read the Rousseau piece about luxury,” he suggested, and Arbop and G both nodded and indicated that they probably would.

“Have you got existing ideas about luxury?” asked the man impatiently after a pause. “We could talk about those. You don’t have to include me, I’m just the proprietor. I like a lively café. That’s my only interest in the game. Talk about whatever you like.”

It made it very difficult to talk. G and Arbop did not tarry there for long, but thanked the man very much and made sure to wish him luck with his enterprise, as his chosen spot was a good one and anybody in the tunnels for any length of time would certainly be more than pleased to find him.

They moved on, and soon played a few games of nine ball in a little cubby hole with an eight-foot pool table, with G skunking Arbop in a quick race to five, and it wasn’t until they had been in the tunnels for what was certainly less than a month that they opened a door to a side room full of people they both knew. The jarring thing for Arbop was that he felt they ought to have looked up in alarm. They didn’t. They were perfectly at their ease.

“Come in,” said Grimsby, waving his arms.

The room was twice as large as most of the tunnel rooms they had seen previously, easily accommodating the long conference table around which were seated the hard-faced members of the Keratin Mob. None of them appeared to be under arrest. One sat with a deck of cards and worked on a fancy manoeuvre. Over and over again he tried his hand at spring-shooting, in which the pack is shot in a fluid stream arc of cards from one hand to the other. One of the others leaned close to one of his colleagues and whispered something and the two of them chuckled. It wasn't done in anything like a snide way, it was all good humoured. Two others were watching some kind of video with race cars on a small hand-held screen, while yet another seemed to be bored and checking his social media. One was going over blueprints with a serious face. Grimsby paced and read aloud from a copy of Archbishop Fénelon's allegory *Télémaque*, arguing stridently for forcing urban populations back into agricultural occupations in the countryside. Arbop looked at G, and G did not look surprised. The walls oozed with slugs, and snails hugged the corners of the floor.

"You're releasing them too quickly," said Grimsby to the Keratin Man with the cards. "Take the pressure off more smoothly. Mind first, body follows."

Grimsby took out his own brand new pack of cards and unsealed it, being careful to make it clear to everyone how new the pack was and how nothing was being concealed. He shuffled them several times deftly, barely lifting the corners of the two halves and effortlessly pushing them together into a single pile. Then, without so much as a condescending glance at anyone he sent a long perfect arc of cards shooting from one hand to the other and invited Arbop to cut the deck. Somewhat uncertainly, Arbop approached the table and agreed to do so.

"Flip them over," said Grimsby. "Go on, have a look."

Arbop turned the cards face up.

“Are they shuffled?” asked Grimsby. “Would you say they were all mixed up?”

“They seem to be.”

“Please go ahead and shuffle them again as much as you like. You can shuffle cards? You don’t have to be fancy at it like I am. I have far too much free time. I assure you the skill is no good reflection on my character.”

Arbop shuffled them loosely and pushed the deck back towards Grimsby.

“Very good. All right. Would you help me with an experiment? This really is more of an experiment than a trick. A mental experiment. I feel that people are very much more sensitive than most of us give them credit for most of the time. We of course have our five senses, but don’t you feel we have more than that as well? Don’t you have hunches that turn out to be true? Can’t you tell within moments of meeting someone, instantly when you shake their hand, whether the person is an egotist, for example, somebody with issues, somebody whose energy just creates some kind of bad noise against yours?”

Arbop knew he was being played to and he enjoyed it. He felt the desire to play along, and anyway he did certainly agree.

“Yes,” said Arbop cheekily. “I feel that way about you to be honest.”

Everyone laughed, and nobody laughed harder than Grimsby.

“Exactly!” said Grimsby, with a gaze simultaneously so penetrating and so light that it was unsettling. “You see, everything is so much better when people are honest. It breaks the ice. It lets us be natural. Thank you for that. Anyone who can’t handle it just opts out of the better world until they’re ready. Now, this is a test of your sensitivity, if you’re willing, and I have a strong sense that you’ll do very well

indeed. That's my own sensitivity, which doesn't count. But don't worry, it's not the sort of thing where you'll be judged or you can fail or anything, there's nothing like that. It's just interesting and fun. Shall we give it a go?"

Arbop gave his consent, and Grimsby insisted that he sit down in a chair and get comfortable and become perfectly relaxed.

"The idea is," said Grimsby, "that I will pick up these cards one by one and show you the back. You will sense whether you think it's a red card or a black one. Probably the first thing that comes into your head, but of course if you get an impulse to change you can do that as well. You might feel like you are guessing or imagining things and that's fine, everybody does, that's normal. Just make your decision based on what you feel and let me know, and I will put the cards you feel are red into one pile and the cards you feel are black into another one. At the end we'll see how right you were. No pressure, no consequences. It's just fascinating and fun. Are you ready?"

Arbop was ready. One by one the cards were lifted from the deck, and Arbop assigned them either to the red pile or to the black one. He had no feeling for which card was what, but let random impressions come into his head, and often just said one colour because he had issued a recent preponderance of the other. Halfway through Grimsby stopped the proceedings.

"I just feel like you may be getting into a rut, which is normal. We need some freshness. So let's change up the piles. From now on, reds will go into the black pile, and blacks will go into the red pile, all right? We don't have to if you don't want to."

Arbop had no objection and no sense of what was going on, so he agreed to the proposal and continued naming colours while feeling nothing of which he could

be the least bit certain. What he expected was that at the end, the cards would be revealed and they'd be a mishmash, and he himself would find himself merely the butt of an elaborate joke, a perfect example of an insensitive with no psychic abilities whatsoever. And yet, that would be a bad trick. Grimsby had something up his sleeve, surely. But what? How? Arbop had the exact sensation he always had whenever anyone told him a fact.

When it came to the last card and Arbop had made his determination, Grimsby frowned and said that he felt perhaps Arbop had stopped caring, and had perhaps made his decision arbitrarily. Would he like to change it? Was he perfectly happy with his final choice? It certainly wasn't too late to switch piles? Arbop stuck with his choice.

"Very well then," said Grimsby. "Let's see how we've done."

He began to turn the cards face up one by one. The first two or three were correct, all red, as were the next two or three until the assembled men began to murmur. By the time he reached twelve or thirteen in a row, anyone would have been shocked to see one go wrong. None did. Each pile was monochromatic through to the halfway point, the point at which the piles had been changed, at which point they were monochromatic the other way perfectly right through to the end. Not a single card out of place in either pile. An extraordinary result and obviously one that could be attributed neither to Arbop's choices nor to luck. A trick, naturally, but how could it possibly have been done?

Grimsby congratulated Arbop on all his perfect choices, noting that he must be an enormously sensitive soul indeed. All the men clapped their hands as if in homage to Arbop, who nevertheless understood the obvious. There were no devils, no manifestations of pure evil, but sometimes, particularly in the depths of tunnels,

one likes to imagine that there are, only because the pretending engenders the sort of reverential frame of mind that promotes a life of wonder and maximum receptivity to the unexpected, the same way that it is good to ponder the demonstrable role of microbes in influencing behaviour patterns in mammalian hosts, science working hand in hand with myth in a double-barrelled attack on foolish certainty and badly exaggerated senses of mastery.

Arbop didn't even thank Grimsby for the magic trick. He only stood up and walked out the door, back into the tunnel, without so much as a nod goodbye to any of the men. It was another period of what felt like probably half an hour before he even noticed that G had, at some point, caught up with him and was with him.

"Let's find Kennedy's grave," said G.

Arbop stopped walking just to look at him. He felt nothing, understood nothing, and said nothing.

"Sure," said G, "it's down here, just like Arlington Cemetery. JFK. The little eternal flame and all that, sure, they've got that down here. Follow me, I'll show you."

They walked again for an indeterminate length of time in the darkness, flashlights shining this way and that, turning up a whole lot of nothing but graffiti and crushed cans. But at last they came upon a kind of opening, an expanse fronted by a wrought iron gateway, through which they passed.

"This is the place," said G. "It's supposed to be in here. Let's have a look around."

They were far from the only ones there. It was a wide expanse of subterranean space and they seemed to have arrived on an open day, a festival. Families and couples wandered smiling around, along with unattached single people

and small groups of friends, just browsing among the grave sites. Each site had an inviting sign in large, clear lettering, announcing the surname of the deceased. The plots had somehow been arranged very conveniently in alphabetical order. These were not mere stones in the ground, they were more like booths one might find at a crafts fair, and indeed interspersed among the deathly spaces were vendors of delights, such as bubble-making paraphernalia, the sort that could make enormous floating spheres with diameters upwards of a metre. One could buy churros and hot dogs and cotton candy, but alas there were no carnival rides, or if there were then Arbop and G had not yet stumbled upon them. Naturally the graves were the main attractions, and most of these boasted simple mausoleums into which the public were invited, just for the day. The cool stones and the idea of death made for an atmosphere of that special macabre sort of gaiety in which people self-consciously delighted in their own ironic embrace of the ghastly.

Almost immediately, having entered at the beginning among the A's, Arbop found a stall marked with his own surname, in between other names like Arbuckle and Arabella. His was not a common name, but you'd run into it now and again, startling every time. Throughout his life Arbop had had to issue spelling corrections based on mistaken assumptions to people who saw and heard his name as it really as but could not bring themselves to believe it, to the extent that he no longer found it annoying. Rather, he had developed a good-natured, even jocular and self-deprecating approach that involved more apology than correction. In fact he didn't know any Arbops that weren't in his own family, but had heard that there might be Arbops off in Norway or even further afield, Arbops that might in theory have been branches of his own family tree, even presumably were, but were so distantly related that their common ancestors might as well have been *Australopithecus*. In short it



was exciting to see the Arbop sign inviting him in to the mausoleum. Despite the apparently open nature of the event, the truth is that he would have felt somewhat intrusive voyeuristically entering some stranger's sepulchre. Nobody could blame him for entering the Arbop exhibit however. He could simply say to any mourners he might encounter that he wanted to see if it was a relative, which in fact was precisely the truth of the matter, and that he, in sympathy, would like to offer his condolences to anyone who was, after all, a family member of some kind. This latter embellishment was not strictly true but nobody would openly dispute it no matter how much they suspected that it was all a bunch of nonsense from some morbid thrill seeker. No, he had rights here and he would exercise them. These Arbops would undoubtedly be delighted, even in their grief, to meet another Arbop. Everyone loves an amazing coincidence, no matter what. It speaks of gods and miracles and a caring universe comprising tendrils with a certain amount of agency. G went in with him.

Cold stone. The only light came from flames, large candles — torches really — affixed to the wall, lamps that would have been simply normal in another age. It was a roomy mausoleum with a few dusty glass display cases, including one small one that Arbop instinctively avoided, preferring to keep it on the periphery of his vision while he looked at a larger one that held some sort of, well, it looked like perhaps a bassinet and there might have been some toys. He hadn't gotten very close to it in order to make his inspection when he heard G say, *oh God*. It didn't sound like G because the tone of voice was so different and so choked. This was a G overcome with emotion and that was novel and frightening.

He was where Arbop knew he would be, right by that small display case that Arbop had not wanted to see. Now he could not help it and he could not put it off.

He took the two small steps towards it and saw. It was a baby in the small glass case, convulsively terrifying. It hadn't occurred to Arbop for a moment that the deceased would be a small child, just an infant, no more than a few months old. He had imagined an old person, and a man, for reasons that were doubtlessly sexist, but no, this was just a little baby. A son, in fact. But that wasn't the worst of it. The freakish horror was that there was a living woman in with the dead child, right there sealed in the case with it, sobbing while giving it a semblance of mouth to mouth resuscitation, or was it just a kiss, a repetitive and repulsive wet sucking kiss covered in all the byproducts of sobbing. The woman herself was impossibly tiny, two or perhaps three times the size of the baby, skinny as snakes and dressed quite naturally in black from head to toe. One would have thought she was dead too by the look of her, apart from the sobbing and the lips, so pale and gaunt was she. Must be the mother, thought Arbop. Should she be in there? This was a tastelessly nightmarish display. What is going on around here? What is this place? Do I know these people?

Arbop did not remember leaving the mausoleum, nor the cemetery in general. He knew they had not made it as far as the grave of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and he doubted that the grave really was there. It hadn't made much sense but then what had? In any case he didn't care whether he saw the stupid grave of some philandering politician. Leave it for the tourists. This was his town, a town for the living.

He understood then with his whole body that the boy was his, and the tiny sucking white creature in black then, well, he knew very well who she had to be.

"Was that Effie?" he asked G.

G didn't say anything, but Arbop looked at him and was surprised to see that tears were still streaming down his cheeks.

"She looked different," Arbop continued.

G still had nothing to add, and they walked on in silence with flashlights and graffiti, crushed cans and distant noises.

"I remember now," said Arbop after a time. "She left me after that. Everything broke. We couldn't go on."

Arbop took two more steps and fell and didn't try to get up. He was very tired so he curled up into a ball, which made him feel a bit warmer and softer although the tunnel remained cold and hard. If he could have done the whole journey over knowing what he knew now, he'd have brought a pillow and a blanket.

He woke up some time later feeling like he had had a short nap. He was still in the tunnel. G was gone but that was all right. The tunnel felt softer, and Arbop began to dig at it with his fingers, it came away like wet soil so he kept digging until he poked a hole right through the floor and a rush of air came through, a breezy little stream along with some more vivid noise. He widened the hole until it was as wide as his cheeks, at which point he plugged it up with his face and looked down into the scene below. Arbop smiled because he knew that if anyone looked up they would see his smiling face like it was a plaster ceiling rose. He resisted the urge to spit.

There was Strongman Simms down there standing on some rubble, covered in ash, doing his level best to appear heroic. The music was pumping like the dance was going on come hell or high water. Partygoers were being helped by men wearing boots and reflective jackets, helped to walk gingerly along the jagged slabs of broken concrete with tragically unsuitable shoes. This used to be the ballroom under the Civic Centre. Scientists were being dragooned into explaining

what had happened in terms the newspapers would accept so that public opinion could be established. Simms had one of them by the lapels of his lab coat, shaking him so hard it was all the fellow could do to keep his thick black eyeglass frames on his nose. With the outer wall destroyed, young troops from the zone beyond stared like country rubes on bales of hay being asked in to dance their first quadrille at a Petersburg ball. When they got their wits about them at last they began to help the ladies and gentlemen out of the destruction and into the waiting helicopters, which would airlift them out to goodness knows where. Someplace better. Anywhere. Ten odd little men with the keratin faces stood wiggling and waving as each copter took off. But they weren't down there at all, they were definitely behind him. Then Arbop felt the first nibblings on the ends of his legs.

The strangest thing was the lack of pain. It didn't hurt at all, but it was disgusting. There were lots of chewing and squelching sounds, wet slappy sounds multiplied by the hundreds. His lower body was covered in slugs. When he pulled his face out of the hole and flipped his body around to see just what in tarnation was going on, his upper body got stuck to a very substantial spider web. He couldn't do anything but hope they stopped, or so he initially thought, but then his disgust at all the wet noise became a greater disgust at his lack of fighting spirit. How about all the frail elderly people who could lift cars off loved ones thanks to a surge of adrenaline? Couldn't he even muster some adrenaline when his own lower extremities were being eaten by slugs? Of course he could, he told himself, all he needed to do was to get angry and to exert himself. Just try! Just push! With some primal screaming he tore himself from the web and began to crawl up the tunnel, at which point he discovered that he had turned a major liability, namely the slugs, into

something of an asset: he was slippery. Once he got going, the pulling himself along was greatly enabled by the prevalence of slime.

Arbop needed out of these damned tunnels pronto, and there wasn't time to look for a proper exit. He'd dug through the floor, maybe he could dig his way out through the ceiling. Up and out! Air and sky! Yes, he could still reach the ceiling, and yes, it gave way, all it was was hard-packed soil. It yielded to his fingers. He poked and grabbed and pulled and tore in something of a frenzy, very glad that G was no longer there to see him in such ridiculous straits. Soil and roots and potatoes began to fall on his head, into his mouth and eyes. He spat and winced and continued by the strength of his fingers to fight for the preservation of his upper body at least. His legs appeared to be a lost cause, his pelvis was already mostly gone. What a blessing that there was no pain. The numbness made the loss quite bearable.

Finally he busted through, he laughed with joy when he saw a finger hole of blue sky and felt the freshness of the air. He laughed as he balled up his fist and punched a larger hole upwards, laughed uncontrollably when it sent a potato flying skyward. It was a beautiful day, a glorious day, a classic one for the garden. Having gotten a good fist-width of clearing he put his hand into it and crashed it about, widening the gap, increasing the air flow. The soil wasn't offering any resistance now. What's more, there would soon be help. He heard voices of surprise and amusement.

"Arbop!" came the avuncular voice of President Kennedy, standing over him and looking down with his hands on his hips and a broad handsome smile on his young face. "Is it in the bylaws that all the gardeners have to end up half buried in their own soil here? What odd customs!"

He leaned down and offered a hand to Arbop, who was able to grab on. Arbop writhed his way out and smiled during the rescue. He was being pulled onto his own cultivated land by the vigorous arms of a wry-faced President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who laid him out flat and, seeing him safe, put his hands back on his hips and roared with laughter.

“Is that all that’s left of you?” he practically shouted. “Seriously?”

Arbop wanted to warn the young president about the conga line of slugs going in one of his ears and out the other, but he had battle sweats, his brother had been dead for a long time, he was childless, Effie was never coming back, and he was so exhausted that he fainted dead away.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

When Arbop opened his eyes after a long period of unconsciousness, he was looking into the lovely and elegant yet professionally detached face of Dr Bronofsky. She was looking at him as if she were assessing the ripeness of a giant mango.

“You’re alive,” said Arbop.

“That makes two of us,” said Dr Bronofsky.

“I was worried about you,” said Arbop. “I thought you might have been powdered in the big collapse.”

“Let’s talk about you.”

“OK.”

“Physically, you’re stable.”

“But I’ve gone insane?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Oh good.”

“We’ve known for some time there’s no reliable way to distinguish between the sane and the insane.”

“That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard,” said Arbop, “and you sound insane when you say it.”

Dr Bronofsky pseudo-smiled clinically and took a few notes. While she did so, Arbop looked down the length of his own body and found it shorter than he expected. None of his toes had come back, and now his feet and both of his legs were gone. He knew that the trite thing to do would be to express shock and grief. Arbop would defy those expectations. He would remain calm. He would instantly recognise the facts as unchangeable and would summon the serenity necessary to

accept them. So. This is how it would be then. There was nothing to complain about. He was alive. Mentally alert. He still had his torso. Life was still worth living. He would adapt, and even forget. He had eyes and hands. He could read. Was his whatsis still there? Perhaps he would wait a while before checking. He was quite sure he could feel a little something, although it might well turn out to be a phantom whatsis. It is the sort of thing that really happens.

Arbop gathered that he had been half eaten by ecstatic slugs and snails, although Dr Bronofsky had put it in her own words. There were no other known cases of anything similar, Arbop was certain of that just from her tone even though she was being very calm about it. Soil scientists had undoubtedly been called in, but their research would likely take some time. People had not been banned from tending to their gardens, that would be overly alarmist, but one could be very sure some would be staying away voluntarily for a while. Something this grotesque was certain to have made the news and it would make a good percentage of gardeners feel a bit queasy about putting the old wellies on. That was just simple maths times x amount of speculation. Dr Bronofsky had her own methods of course and liked to approach a subject in a roundabout way by talking about anything else but it was easy to tell she knew what she was doing.

“You like coffee, don’t you?” asked Dr Bronofsky.

“Yes, please,” replied Arbop, misinterpreting the question as an offer.

Dr Bronofsky jotted down some notes.

“With milk, I believe, but not sugar?”

“Correct.”

More notes.

“Is that relevant to my case?” asked Arbop.



“Hm? Oh yes. Just a moment.”

She continued scribbling on her pad.

“I thought for a moment you were offering me a cup,” said Arbop. “I could murder a cup of coffee.”

“Anyone can have a cup nowadays,” said Dr Bronofsky. “It’s for the masses, even the poor. Egalitarianism. People don’t realise it but that’s progress.”

“Could I have one?”

“Hm? Certainly!”

Dr Bronofsky nodded to her assistant, who suddenly appeared from a camouflaged spot against the cabinets in the background. The unlikely assistant appeared to be Grimsby, her personal Grimsby, who wordlessly exited the room. When the coffee came back, however, it was in the hands of an entirely different person, a somewhat awkward male orderly with wonky glasses and an unfortunate complexion. Arbop couldn’t shake an uncomfortable feeling of unreality as he accepted the coffee and enjoyed his first tentative sip under the penetrating observation of Dr Bronofsky.

“It remains true,” said the doctor, “that the indulgence of unbridled appetites poses a genuine threat to the realisation of any project for universal enlightenment.”

“I have about four cups a day,” said Arbop. “I should cut down. I haven’t done much for enlightenment. But I’m not the worst offender. G must have at least eight cups. And he puts sugar in his.”

Bronofsky’s pencil was poised over her pad, like a spider. Arbop sipped his coffee to buy a little thinking time. Finally he just shrugged. She scribbled.

“What do you suppose is at stake in all of this?” she asked.

Arbop frowned.

“Well,” he said, “there’s what’s left of me.”

Scribble.

“Do you feel cheated?”

“Is this a psychological exam?” asked Arbop.

“Ah!” said the doctor, scribbling and smiling. “Did you know, it’s only in English that the word mind lacks a material connotation. *Esprit* and *Geist* both have far more flexible uses including the alimentary and the quite physiological.”

“And the others? Hausa? Telugu? Apache? Can English really be alone?”

“Excellent,” said Dr Bronofsky, a scar forming diagonally across her face.

“The point is, I believe in treating the whole patient, don’t you? It’s a systems approach, it may sound exotic but I think most people would agree that it’s a recipe for disaster to ignore the way things interconnect. Don’t you think so? Would you prefer I ignore most of you?”

“Yes, definitely,” said Arbop.

“You tend to focus on the big picture. Would you say that was true?”

“Nonsense. Where do you get that from? I look after small corners.”

“Humility,” said Dr Bronofsky with an approving nod, scribbling and seeming well satisfied by how things were going, which pleased Arbop and made him feel resentful at the same time. Her face did not have a scar after all.

“If you don’t mind,” said Arbop, “I’d like to check something.”

“By all means.”

Arbop thought she might look away out of discretion but she didn’t, so he decided that he didn’t care. He lifted the sheet that covered him and peered down past his belly. There were underpants, but beneath? He lifted the waist band, frowned, let go, and smoothed his cotton sheet back out over the top of himself. Dr

Bronofsky seemed to be studying him for a reaction. It was as if she were expecting this moment to come, and was quietly pleased to have been prepared for it.

“If you’d like to talk about it...”

“Not really,” said Arbop. “I’ll probably miss it less than I imagine.”

“There are of course hygienic considerations. You’ll have noticed the catheter.”

“Yes yes.”

“Risks of infection and so forth.”

“Fine, yes.”

The doctor simply wouldn’t go away. Apparently there was a lot to talk about and plenty of time in which to do it. Arbop would not be leaving the hospital that day. He would be kept for recuperation and observation for some indeterminate period. By the end of it he would be astonished at the range of topics they had covered, by the types of disclosures he had made. His initial attraction to Dr Bronofsky had changed. She was still just as fine boned and elegant of bearing but his interest had waned, probably in no small part as a result of his condition. He felt as if he were on an interminable first date with somebody, a date that went on for days and days even though they both knew from the first moments that the requisite chemistry was lacking. It had the feel of a date that had been arranged by a bureaucrat. Sooner or later, if they were lucky, someone would come and put them both away in separate drawers.

He let the doctor’s voice recede into the background and become tiny and distant. His mind began to roam freely, and how liberating it felt to ignore a doctor completely without the least feeling of guilt or stress. He became aware of background feelings, just the usual feelings that could be expected when the mother

of a grown man died a long time ago in car accident. One could be horrified, naturally, and as saddened as you please, but not cheated. If your parents die when you're all grown up, on what basis will you file your complaint? This would not count as an explanation for any personal aberrations. He had had his childhood. There was no shortage of examples of people who had it worse, far worse. If ever there was a time to buck up it was when your mother died in a car accident on your twenty-seventh birthday.

One time he had come out of his bedroom, age about nine, because he had heard his mother screaming in a way he had found very frightening. He had run down the stairs to the kitchen and there she was, hunched down on the floor, all alone, pulling at her own hair and screaming. Objects around her were in disarray. The new blender, smashed. Knives about. Plates in fragments. Toaster on the wrong side of the room, on the floor against the wall. Dent in the wall above it. Her screaming had a guttural quality, rising and falling according to a pattern that began as a low growl and then erupted in fury, in pain, only to end muted, the scream continuing with the mouth closed.

"Mom," he had said. "Are you all right?"

He thought she had hurt herself. The broken glass, the plates, the toaster. The knives.

But she hadn't. She had merely made a huge mess. On purpose.

Young Arbop couldn't even imagine the amount of trouble he would have been in if it had been he who had done anything remotely similar. When she looked up and at last acknowledged his presence, it was to say something preposterous.

"It's not your fault," she said, sobbing and pulling him close. "It's not your fault."

Over and over. Obviously it wasn't his fault. It hadn't even crossed his mind that he might conceivably be to blame for this. He hadn't been anywhere near the kitchen. She had done it herself, it was more than evident. And her apologies, over and over and over, with hugs and kisses that left wet spots on his cheeks — fine, but it wasn't his place to forgive her. If she had to apologise to somebody it ought to be for someone else's benefit. He didn't care if the things were broken or not. None of the broken things was his, nor was he sentimentally attached to any of this crockery. He had made a quick survey of the wreckage for familiar colourful plastic parts of cherished supercars or flying warriors, but no, all clear there, nothing worrisome at all. Breaking things per se was glorious. In fact, he'd gladly help her break more things, which he told her in an effort to be kind and helpful. It had made her do one of those laughs that come out through the tears. He asked her what the matter was and she had said it was nothing. When he objected to that answer on the basis that it was absurd, she thought and then blamed it on the suburbs. She was obviously in the mood for a lot of nonsense. It was not unlike having the giggles. She had fallen off the boat of pure reason. Young Arbop had excused himself, had made himself scarce. Let Daddy handle this one when he got home, if it was still an issue in the hours and hours and hours away that would be. So, probably not.

The doctor had stopped talking, effectively interrupting Arbop with her silence. He looked up at her and shrugged.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Things had shown signs of growing back a bit, but Dr Bronofsky wasn't quite done with him yet. Still, it was encouraging to see certain nubs forming and extending, like buds in springtime. Arbop mentioned to the doctor with a shy smile that when he was five he believed that birds grew on trees. Not all birds, of course, and not all trees either. Magnolia trees. He wasn't stupid, but there was this one particular magnolia tree, which hung out over the sidewalk so that his father had to give it a wide berth during shoulder rides or little Arbop would get his face scratched by the angular branches, possibly even lose an eye. Or if not lose it have it punctured. In any case this magnolia tree in the springtime had fuzzy ellipsoids sprouting all over it, and Arbop was certain that his teacher had said they were little birds. They certainly looked like little birds, or more precisely they looked like they were in the process of becoming little birds. At some point in the spring they would surely pop themselves right off the branches, nip themselves free, and this was nature's wisdom developed over millions of years because the birds could immediately start building their nests right there in the tree, even before worrying about learning to fly. It was a good place for birds to come from and it made sense.

It wasn't very long before Arbop figured out that it wasn't so, that it couldn't have been so, and the only mystery was why his teacher would have taught him something so false, as if intentionally setting him up for later embarrassment. His father had laughed at the time, there was the top of his head as Arbop looked down from his shoulder perch when they passed the tree and Arbop explained to him to be careful of the birds, and the top of his father's head shook and the tip of his nose lit up with the laughter as Arbop looked down. He remembered getting annoyed at his father's attempts at scientific correction. His teacher had said it. His teacher. Why

couldn't Daddy understand, why was he trying to mock the teacher? They're magnolia blossoms, he'd shout, laughing. So? What does that prove?

Arbop laughed telling the story to Dr Bronofsky, that although he had figured out fairly quickly that he had been wrong, it wasn't until many years later that he realised that his teacher, Miss Specter, must have said buds, not birds. It was her accent. Dr Bronofsky didn't laugh. Just took notes. She was hung up on hearing more about Grimsby and tunnels and hot dog dynamite and the tininess of cities and horrifying experiences in imaginary cemeteries. Arbop explained, slowly, that if Dakka Budendeet was an author, then he was writing a play within a play, setting up a little *mise en abyme*.

But he remembered something else about his brother, when they were little. This was funny. Dr Bronofsky should listen to it. Oliver never liked to have half of anything. He'd rather have nothing than half. Once their mother tried to foist half a fairy cake on him and he was so angry about it that he angrily declared he would never eat fairy cakes again. Nor did he. Eventually the initial reason for the boycott was lost to memory, but the boycott itself remained out of force of habit and sense of principle. He was as good as his word, no matter how stupid his word was, which was simultaneously admirable and absurd, but as far as Arbop was concerned, mostly admirable, since what wasn't absurd?

Arbop for his part was happy with half. Whole not an option? Half would be fine. He took the conventional view, that half was better than nothing.

What he had remembered was the time they had discovered crumpets. The family had gone crumpet crazy. For a week or so, crumpets might be eaten at any time of day, for breakfast, as an afternoon snack, or even a bit of a late night treat before bedtime. This was one of the latter. He and Oliver were settled into their

beds, receiving their bedtime narratives courtesy, that particular evening, of their mother. One last snack was permissible. There was one crumpet left. That was the key piece of information that Arbop knew. What is information? Power. Well done.

“Crumpet please!” Oliver had shouted gaily.

There’s only one. Did you also want a crumpet, Bodhamari? Yes please.

Ah but there’s only one.

“Let’s have half each!” suggested Arbop cheerfully.

Would you like half a crumpet, Oliver? No. Well, it’s half a crumpet or a whole piece of childish white toast.

“Whole piece of toast,” said Oliver gloomily.

So, Bodhamari?

Arbop had smiled and shrugged.

“Crumpet?” he had said.

Whole crumpet.

“Do you see how mean I was?” asked Arbop, imploring Dr Bronofsky to see. “Don’t you see how mean that was? I’m sorry about that now. I’m sorry Oliver!”

Arbop laughed and wiped his eyes. He was disturbed to notice that the doctor was looking at him in a kind way, no longer quite so clinically distant. This was bad. Was he that far gone?

It was becoming clear that she thought he had lost his grip on reality and had become paranoid. She probably didn’t believe there were any tunnels, or any Keratin Grimsby Budendakka Deetles. She probably thinks Civic Centres collapse and monuments wobble for no reason. Why was he wasting his time with this doctor? But she had reminded him of so many delightful stories from when he was little.

“Would you like me to take you into the tunnels?” he asked.



She said she would like that. Did he think he could remember where they were? Certainly, he knew exactly where they were. Would she like to go right now? If she had a wheelchair at the ready he felt fully prepared, more than delighted.

“Not just now,” she said. “We’ll have to make a time.”

The condescension was palpable. So it was true. They were enemies. Paranoid am I? We’ll have to make a time. Yes, make a time, sure, let’s create time. Should we make a space too? Why not make some space-time and go down a wormhole? One tunnel was as good as another as long as we’re making things. What shall we make next? Shall we make love Dr Bronofsky? We’d better make the abstract sort of cosmic brotherly love, or is it acosmic? I haven’t got much of a willy but I daresay it’s coming back, it’s tingling doctor, shall I tell you about my tingles? We could make one, you and I, couldn’t we doctor? What’s one willy if we’re already making time and space? Perhaps not just now, but perhaps another day we could make a space-time willy wormhole and dive right in, I’ll bet we’d find some Grimsbys and some people so unlike ourselves we’d just pretend they couldn’t possibly exist, but it wouldn’t matter because they’d disappear as soon as we focused on them anyway, this is what such men do, that’s the trouble, they never were there in the first place, they were always somewhere else. You won’t find them in any tunnels. What would they be doing down there? The idea is absurd. You’ll find tradesmen though, compartmentalised workers, demolition boys, shaft sinkers, steamfitters, mechanics. Just doing my job, ma’am. Don’t thank me, ma’am. Just swallowing my own mirror, ma’am, no reflection on you. Pick a shard, any shard.

G exists, declared Arbop to the doctor, tears in his eyes. We worked together every day. Fought together, stayed vigilant together, did you know that? We killed a squirrel accidentally in defence of the perimeter once. Poor thing. It was nothing

personal. *It was no reflection on him.* It may even have been a rabbit for all there was left of it. He likes sugar in his coffee, regular coffee, milk and sugar, but he's a good man. I don't suspect him of anything. Not even if he is guilty. Everything, you see, depends on something else that turns out to be unreliable. It's unreliability, disappearance, and meaningless details all the way down. The best way to keep the meaning out of the details is not to read the fine print. Everything depends on that. Make possibilities impossible, that's what Sherlock Holmes would do. Hello detective, there's been a crime here and I'm obviously suspect number one. Let's not beat about the bush. Those are the facts. There was a Columbo episode about it. The husband shook his hand straight away and said the husband is always a suspect in a case like this, there's nothing personal about it, why should I be offended? Only a guilty party would try to obstruct your investigation. I am at your service to help you do your job. The fact is I was in Colorado at the time, I'll give you my flight numbers, my secretary can give you the receipts, the airline can tell you I checked in, the hotel can tell you I was there, I'll name a dozen people I met with, and when you've eliminated me as a possibility we can get on to finding the real killer. Columbo appreciates a suspect like that with all the conmen he normally puts up with. Never hide, that's my motto. It's always the hiding that gives them away. Sooner or later the answers just don't add up. In comes Columbo, scratching his head. Concede the inevitable at the beginning. Mistakes are so easy to make, it's a wonder we don't all do something terrible like murder a loved one suddenly without really meaning to, and spend the rest of our lives in misery over it, groaning in agony over the terrible, unthinkable thing we can't undo. Haven't you had dreams like that? I have. Give me the severest possible sentence. That's my motto too. No

begging for forgiveness. What a pathetic show that would be. Who on earth would even want it?

Oliver, Oliver, Oliver, of course, you always want to know about my brother, that's fine, I'm perfectly happy to indulge your morbid curiosity. You think he wants to penetrate the perimeter, come back in from the other side, I've often thought so myself, it's natural, detective. Nothing personal about it. Pure logic. Why should I be offended? Don't expect me to dodge the issue. I'll give you his flight numbers and his secretary's phone number, it's all perfectly transparent. Shall I pretend I didn't love him? Shall I feed him to your pigs? You can think what you like about me not writing back to him, he remains my brother, he makes that very claim in all his letters, I remain your brother, he says. You would never understand his letters even if I showed them to you. Dear my brother Bodhamari whom I love, he starts them all that way, you see, though we are estranged. I have no secrets. Then he would continue from the heart, not from some preconceived ideas about sentence structures and ordinary meanings. At a certain level of acceleration, to Oliver, tyranny, like plague and cholera, paints a Louis XV armchair and ceases to despair over poetic findings. This is the way he thinks, you see. This is how well I love him. Man emerges howling from a deformed optic with a few grams of iron sulphate, suppressing time like the colour of the feathers of birds at midnight, music pouring from the holes in fairy tales. Do you see what I mean? If I betray him by honouring him in the way you intend, unspoken oaths of allegiance embodied in solitude will exterminate my father's eccentricity in umbilical limbo against speculative imagery. Pages and pages of it, I'm sure you can imagine it, I believe in the power of your imagination, although that is probably just my own imagination imagining an idealised image of your imagination imagining things beyond your imagination. If

Oliver were here he would tell you, in an apologetic tone, without the least explanation, about surprising properties of nicotine amidst landscapes of fir trees, cossacks, fanaticism, and antiquated heroism. You'd have your hands full, doctor. I imagine you'd be charmed, but of course the problem once again is that I speak of my imagination, not yours. Yet still I believe. Not that anything will happen, but that it could. I give that vanishing infinitesimal unlikelihood every chance, every time. The best way to ensure you'll never see a miracle comeback win in the bottom of the ninth is to leave in the middle of the seventh to beat the traffic — along with everyone else. It is as if a whip with its lash divorced an overburdened ecstasy in a paradoxical chimera of bourgeois conventions, flinching from erotic pathos only to arrive like starving wolves at the carcass of an ambivalent torturer.

I don't exaggerate. I don't lie. So if I say something you can be sure it's true — well: you can be sure I mean it. I'm not trying to deceive anybody about anything. I do it anyway but it matters just the same. It matters what we try to do.

Doctor Bronofsky listened to all of this, even the parts that were said out loud, and betrayed no emotion.

"And Kennedy?" she asked.

"I never said Kennedy was alive. He has the bones of a dead man. I suppose you think I'd cut him open alive just to get at them. I suppose you think I'd grab two femurs and pound feral, tempestuous rhythms on his stretched skin. How ghoulish. You should be ashamed of yourself."

"I didn't ask you about Kennedy."

"Didn't you?"

"I asked about your brother. Oliver."

“I know my brother’s name. How insane do you think I am? I suppose you’ll say my knees have already come back. I suppose you’ll say I invented slugs. Yes, I invented them. I invented slugs and I invented cabbage. A slug needs cabbage. What do you expect them to eat? My brother is dead. He existed. He was real. And now he’s dead and that is that. I know it perfectly well. How’s that for insanity?”

“And the letters?”

“The letters? The letters? The letters of the alphabet? Which alphabet?”

“Oliver’s letters.”

“What business is it of yours?”

“Very good. There’s someone here who would like to see you, if you’re willing.”

“Is it President Kennedy?”

“No.”

“A bone cold bag of death?”

“No.”

“I’m willing to see anyone, especially if they’re dead or they never existed.”

There was a small amount of additional cautionary talk about being calm, which annoyed Arbop, who did not consider himself to be the sort of man who required such warnings. Then Doctor Bronofsky left the room briefly and came back in with Effie.

“Shall I...” said the doctor.

“You can leave,” said Effie.

Effie took a chair and slid it up next to the bed where Arbop lay breathing. He had closed his eyes but he knew she was there. She was real and there in the present moment. Arbop breathed and noticed how the air felt and smelled different

because of her presence. He felt his heart beating and listened to the sounds of moving blood and biological processes occurring within him, which he could hear because he had put his fingers into his ears. There was a continual high-pitched sound, normally unnoticed but always there. Everything had to come through it. Perhaps it cancelled out some other sound, raising the possibility of a sound he had never heard and could never hear. It could just as easily not be true. Arbop let go of the thought and took his fingers out of his ears. When he opened his eyes Effie had that wry look on her face she always had. She didn't look older but her hair was different. Shorter. She was neither tiny nor shrivelled nor especially pale, and she wasn't sobbing. She wasn't some living horror. She was just there plain as day. You could have taken her to the movies. Her face said everything, as he assumed his own did as well. It had the sorrow and the defiance and the constrained love and the keeping-it-together and the what-do-you-want-me-to-say. So there was no need to do the talking that they did anyway.

“We shouldn't have named him,” he said by way of opening.

She let it hang. Obviously they couldn't have known when they picked out a name. She was glad they had named him, personally. It wasn't why she had come.

“So what the hell happened to you?” she decided to ask.

“Oh,” said Arbop. “Well. I was in the tunnels — you probably wouldn't know about the tunnels. Anyway there were a lot of slugs. I had no idea they could do this, pigs yes, it happened to at least one farmer, slugs, as far as I know, unprecedented, but...”

“But what?”

“Well, just look at me.”

“What am I looking for?”

“Well there used to be more of me, wouldn’t you say?”

“Are we speaking metaphorically?”

“No! Come on.”

“I don’t know. You’ve always been pretty skinny.”

Arbop drew up his knees and wiggled his toes and let out an involuntary gasp that made Effie laugh. So. He had grown back, which intimated only unlikely scenarios. He reached out and grabbed Effie’s hand. As he squeezed it much too hard, she tilted her head and looked at him closely.

“What are you doing here?” he asked her.

“No no no,” she said. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Asked you first.”

“Well, apparently you were calling out for me in your sleep.”

“No. I haven’t slept in years.”

“Yeah. Apparently it was pretty desperate and pathetic and they figured they better call me in.”

“No.”

“No,” she admitted. “Kidding. I mean, it may have happened. But nobody said anything about it to me. It probably happened. Let’s assume it did.”

“Anything’s possible.”

“Anything’s possible. I’m kidding because I have no clue what I’m supposed to say to you. I did get a call. The doc said you were in a bad way and it might help, so...”

“So yeah.”

“Yeah.”

And then there was small talk. Effie had gone places and done things. She had married somebody and by now there were two new children who lived and became larger and larger. She was still married and he was around nearby off doing some shopping. As for Arbop, he worked perimeter security, wasn't seeing anyone, well not anyone in particular anyway. Things were pretty good.

"So what are you doing here?" she asked again.

"Oh, it was just a little bit of macrophageal apoptosis," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Got a little out of control, it's fine. It really is."

He found himself wiggling his toes.

"That's no answer."

Did you have to leave? Whose fault was it? Why couldn't we have blah blah blah? Shouldn't we have blah blah blah? What happened, why is the world, what were we thinking, I love you, how did we get, I cannot bear this.

"You know what magnolia buds look like?" he asked.

"Can't quite picture them."

"Kind of fuzzy? Quite large?"

"Yeah. Sort of."

"Birdlike in a way?"

"OK."

"Yeah well. They just turn into flowers. It's a tree that has flowers, so..."

"Yeah yeah yeah. Gorgeous."

"Yep."

I wonder if we, maybe we could have, our poor baby, I am dying.



“Well, I was just thinking about them,” said Arbop. “There used to be a tree like that near our house when I was growing up. Hey, can I ask you a question? It’s about steamfitting.”

She indicated that he could. The gist of his question was whether it would be possible for a coordinated team of steamfitters to blow a whole city effectively straight up into the sky, maybe in conjunction with a tunnelling crew. Effie expressed her feeling that there would be enormous logistical difficulties in such an enterprise, even assuming the requisite number of evil steamfitters could be brought on board. Was Arbop planning to do any harm to the city himself personally? Was this research?

“Are you crazy or anything?” she asked, in other words.

“Why?”

“I mean are you going to suddenly go all violent or something?”

“Definitely not.”

“What am I doing here?” said Effie.

“I don’t know.”

“Well,” said Effie, standing up. “You seem all right to me. Thanks for wasting my time. You should get out of here. It’s doing my head in and I’ve only been here five minutes.”

“Oh,” he said. “I don’t know, maybe I should...”

“And can you walk?”

He looked at her uncertainly for a moment and then gingerly swung his legs over the side of the bed. He looked down. One two three four five six seven eight nine ten. Wiggle wiggle wiggle. He looked up. He placed his feet on the ground and stood up. He felt dizzy but might have been slightly pretending. It was nothing

serious. He took a step. That was easy. He walked up and down along the side of the bed, and made a small jump accompanied by smiles.

“No problem,” he said.

“You want to meet my husband?” she said.

“No.”

“Good. I don’t feel like introducing you. Hang in there kid.”

I still luh luh luh luh luh.

“Thanks,” said Arbop. “Hey. Good to see you.”

“You too. Get out of here Bodhi. This place gives me the creeps.”

“OK.”

So it was that she left first, and then he did, waiting a decent interval only to avoid the awkwardness. But he made sure to have a quick word with Dr Bronofsky on his way out as well.

“See?” he said. “She’s real. I told you.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy stood in the highest place in the garden, right on Arbop's ridged-up potatoes, which were only now just starting to show, here in the fresh heat of a day in which spring was beginning to flex its muscles. Behind him the ground writhed with slugs and snails. They stretched from Kennedy's feet all the way back past the shed and to the fence that bordered on the murk of the pond. They seemed aggressive. Riled up. Arbop could almost hear them growling but he reckoned he was probably imagining that.

Kennedy wasn't himself. He was wearing denim dungarees and a plaid shirt, and he had a straw hat stuck on top of his head. All of that was wrong, no matter how much Arbop tried to convince himself that it was just a new style he was trying out for the gardening. Kennedy's physical attitude gave the game away, as he just stood there with a big goofy smirk on his face with his thumbs hooked into his belt loops, rocking back and forth on his heels like he didn't have a care in the world. His eyes had lost that keen, perceptive look of critical intelligence. Now he just looked like some dumb goober standing in the muck. A drunken slug fell out of one of his ears. Kennedy spit, looked up and smiled at Arbop, and just as friendly as you please said:

"Howdy!"

"His brain is missing," whispered Grimsby, giving a small shrug. Arbop had not noticed him standing there.

"Wait what?" said Arbop.

Arbop thought about calling the police out of an instinct that Grimsby had something to do with Kennedy's missing brain, but he knew full well he never got a phone signal at the allotment. Could Kennedy's brain actually be missing? It was

implausible. Yet there he was, saying howdy, equally implausible. Something was wrong with the president and the police ought to be involved. Grimsby ought to be questioned. Arbop had an idea: he could fake calling the police. That might unnerve the man and cause him to make some sort of mistake. He pulled out his phone and waved it at Grimsby.

“I’m calling the police,” he announced.

Naturally he had first to pause while the police phone would have been ringing, and suddenly he realised he would have to fake a whole phone call. Even real actors weren’t always good at faking phone calls. Hello, police? Pause. Yes. My name is Arbop. Bodhamari Arbop. That’s B...o... And so forth. Grimsby was not unnerved in the least. He probably had men on the inside of the force. They’d probably come and arrest Arbop for having too many slugs on his allotment. It wasn’t my fault, he’d say, and they’d drag him off and throw him in the back of some van with a hood over his head and spratz him with electric prods until he disappeared.

Despite everything, Arbop attempted to affect a facial expression that would convey that he had seized command of the situation, and that Grimsby was in some real trouble now. A glimmer of sympathy could be detected in Grimsby’s facial response as he reached into his briefcase again and withdrew what appeared to be an Aztec Tlacalhuazcuahuitl, into which he promptly packed some powder. Grimsby put the long pipe to his lips, leaned his head back, and blew. A sparkling effusion of tiny particulates that glinted as if it contained some percentage of atomised glass feathered outward and upward and settled onto the soil near Arbop’s blueberry tree, which had yielded a total of three weak berries in two years. The powder was absorbed into the soil, and the soil started to move.

Millipedes came out as if they thought the sun had gone down, and there were millions of them, easily making billions of tiny feet in all. They outnumbered even the Pulmonata to the east, and together they covered Arbop's garden completely. The millipedes began to secrete their secret liquid weapon: hydrogen cyanide. The day being something of a scorcher, the hydrogen cyanide became a gas, which is something it did at only slightly above room temperature. When Arbop looked back at Grimsby, he saw his nemesis slipping a gas mask over his head.

There is a bit of history behind all this. Four billion years ago, give or take a few hundred million, when the earth itself was just a baby, Jupiter and Saturn created a powerful resonance in the solar system when their orbits fell into a rhythm whereby Jupiter went around the sun exactly twice for every time Saturn did it. As a result, Neptune was shoved outward right past Uranus, which is perhaps when it got a fright and tipped over, and both planets eventually landed in the outer orbits where they can be found to this day. Additionally, a lot of Kuiper belt debris was blasted unceremoniously out of the planetary zone of the solar system, and while they went that-a-way, an enormous quantity of asteroids went hurtling the other way, towards the sun. Earth and its moon were in the way. They were battered in the manner of the cosmos: without pity. And it was good.

Carbon from this asteroid cascade reacted with nitrogen in the earth's feisty young atmosphere and formed hydrogen cyanide, a precursor — some say! — to amino and nucleic acids, creating early pathways to the formation of organic compounds and the spontaneous eruption of life out of the pure nonsense that otherwise existed at the time. Hydrogen cyanide. It's in Prussian Blue, the first modern synthetic pigment, and it's all over Vincent Van Gogh's smash hit painting of the starry night. It can be used as an antidote to thallium and certain other kinds of

heavy metal poisoning. White blood cells generate it during phagocytosis, and use it to murder pathogens. Some pitted fruits have it. Certain moths have it. It comes out of the back end of cars. It was used in German concentration camps under the brand name Zyklon B. A few hundred milligrams of it per cubic metre in the air will kill a human being very handily — a few thousand milligrams if you're in a hurry. It's also been used for killing rodents and whales. Life, art, and death: hydrogen cyanide has it all. It is nothing more or less than true that the millipedes have this magic too. It may be mere coincidence but fossil evidence suggests that millipedes were also the first creatures to move out of the water and breathe. *Pneumodesmus newmani*, found in Scottish siltstone, four hundred and twenty-eight million years old, had the cutest little spiracles for taking the airs. Here are its grandchildren *per saeculorum*, present moment, right now, Arbop's plot, on a bit of a hydrogen cyanide rampage.

Arbop didn't like the look of the bluish mist that floated towards him off the backs of the millipedes. It had an ominously Prussian look to it. He backed away. This was all going to be bad news for his cabbages. He was certain of that, if nothing else.

It hit Kennedy first. His stupid grin turned to the stupid look of uncomprehending concern that anyone might exhibit upon inhaling a chemical asphyxiant that interferes with the normal oxygen usage of the cardiovascular, pulmonary, and central nervous systems. His hands reached up to his neck as his breathing became difficult. *Man is he stupid*, thought Arbop. Too stupid even to run. Too stupid even to duck. Just stand there and choke? It makes a fellow really happy to have a brain.

Arbop took a deep breath, held it, and ran towards the president. How wonderful it is to run with ten toes on your feet. Toes landing, toes bending, toes

springing the body forward. Balanced and agile. Multidirectional. A fantastic sensation. Those who have always had all their toes are unlikely to have appreciated the feeling with the same sense of exaltation.

He reached the president too quickly, in a sense. He would have liked to have kept running, running for joy. Darting this way and that, dodging, leaping, landing, turning, just to express himself in running, a horticultural coryphée in imaginary tights. But there was no time for that, thanks to all this millipede madness. What was it about this Grimsby? He seemed a calculating sort of man at odds with the poetry of gardens, the sounds of the shadows of trees, the anew ascending, as Whitman had it, the wide sweep of revolving cycles, the wondrous quivering, amorous and mature, the peering and penetrating, the contentment with the present, the peace with the past.

Arbop instantly imagined Grimsby's entire childhood. A frail boy with a rich father, the two of them always shouting at everyone. Big shouter and little imitator, desperate to win approval and not be shouted at himself. Frail, pale shouting from a boyish lizard when all he wanted was a mother of his own, not this series of floozies who looked at him like snot on a couch. Other images. The first time his small, bony fist smashed another boy in the face, a larger boy who then shrank, filling little Grimsby with revulsion and power. His little fist working his little whatsis as his cruel head tilted backwards and he panted to the heavens like a lonely hyena until the howl did spurt. Ashamed of his own kindness, weak with the thought of love, wiping his snot on the couch, looking both ways, meeting the eyes of a floozy, burning with nothingness, rejecting the fruits of his greed while demanding more just to see if he'd get it, getting it every time, getting it from a father who shouted

his expectations silently, drifting off into frightened sleep night after night feeling less and less, wanting more and more.

*It'll have been something like that*, thought Arbop, tackling Kennedy to the ground, squelching into a pile of Pulmonata. The gas drifted by above and Kennedy began once more to breathe. He was able to move on his own a little, so Arbop was able to pull him back and out of the way, clear of the cloud entirely. There was fortunately not an infinite supply of hydrogen cyanide; it had boundaries. It was already beginning to drift away upwards, to dissipate. Kennedy smiled stupidly. This was the second time Arbop had saved his life, not that the president would be aware of it at this point.

“Shoot,” he said, as if everything were his own fault.

“Who am I?” asked Arbop, inches away from the presidential face.

It was easy to see that Kennedy was trying very earnestly to think up the answer to the question. He furrowed his brow eagerly as if to please. He clearly felt terrible that he couldn't come up with the goods.

“Derrrrrp,” said Kennedy, casting his eyes downwards in shame.

The gas may have been gone but the millipedes remained and Arbop noticed that they were bearing a load of what certainly appeared to be an inordinate number of left inferior frontal gyri, as if they had been extracted from an equivalent number of frontal lobes of so many cerebral cortices. The little Diplopoda carried the pink chunks on their backs, cooperatively rolling, maintaining forward momentum by committee. It occurred to Arbop that one of those lobe wedges might be Kennedy's, that it might be lost to the man and to history if he didn't act fast, and that he was not capable of acting fast, or at all, because he didn't know what to do. The millipedes and their cerebral cargo were headed, he realised, for the pond.



The pond in question was immediately on the other side of the wooden fence that formed the northern perimeter of the allotment site. It was on public land, and on the surface measured no more than seven feet across and five feet wide — the sort of ordinary small pond in which one might hope on some late spring morning to spot some tadpoles and a big fat mommy frog hiding nearby. Arbop had of course long been aware of the pond on the other side of his fence, and had even guiltily tossed the odd slug into it if he caught one near his chard. But he had largely ignored it, contenting himself with the presumption that this pond would be much like most others, and that in any case it had nothing to do with him.

The millipedes were flowing under the wooden fence and began to spill into the pond, row after row of them. The debrained frontal gyri, which looked as if they might float, did not; they sank into the murk. How deep would they go? How deep could they go? Having never plumbed the depths, Arbop had somehow arrived at the amorphous impression that one could generally stand in this or any pond wearing a bow tie and only need to change one's trousers afterwards. Perhaps the shirttails would be compromised, but certainly a bow tie itself would remain unsullied. A man, no matter how well dressed, would not simply drop beneath the surface like a shiny silver cylinder and disappear, never to be seen again, leaving only his sopping top hat to signal that he, too, once existed and pushed back against the world. There would be a mucky clog-up of brain matter and millipedes, in other words, and sooner than one might hope. There would almost certainly have to be effects of some kind. Hydrological. Nitrogen cycle. You can't just fill a pond up with any old cast-off detritus and hope that things will continue to be hunky dory. The more immediate concern of course remained Kennedy's brain. All of these bits would have to be dredged up, and then the tedious process of DNA matching could begin,

and there were no guarantees that any of it would make a damned bit of difference. Even in the face of certain doom, however, it is better to try than not to. It is better not to be passive. It is better to go down fighting. Effie would understand that. She was all about the joy of futility. Where *was* Effie?

To get to the fence, even to have a peek at the pond, Arbop would have to cross over a good fifty feet of snails, slugs, and poisonous millipedes, only to have also to get past Grimsby himself by the comfrey patch where a multitude of bees hovered with uncertain loyalties.

Arbop heard Effie scream “go” like a strong push in the back. He heard Kennedy say “buh-bye”. He realised it wasn’t Effie but Babs, who had come round from a skulk amidst the apple trees to see what was going on. She had seen enough.

“What about Kennedy?” yelled Arbop.

“Forget him,” shouted Babs. “He’s an idiot! I’ll look after him.”

Arbop set off, not so much running as picking his way as best he could through the Pulmonata, trying to stay away from the millipedes, doing a sort of tentative high-kneed skip-hop across his garden, not sure what he would do about the Grimsby in his way. Grimsby wasn’t an imposing physical presence, but he had a malevolence in his thin little smile that could dampen a person’s zest for getting over wooden fences.

Babs took in the scene and, having developed a weakness for the old Kennedy charm despite her hardened pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps mentality and an attitude towards civil rights that erred on the side of cowardly stick-em-when-they’re-not-looking racism, she saw that there was a helpful role that she could play. She decided to play it, and began to run, even outpacing the slow-footed Arbop. Grimsby saw them coming from a slow-motion mile away, of course, but

still he never expected an elderly woman to take a head-first dive at his knees. Babs put him down on his backside and stayed on top of him. She had to stay on him for an uncomfortably long period of time because it took Arbop ages to scale the fence. He failed twice before jogging over to his shed and retrieving a plastic chair, with Babs all the while on Grimsby's chest, Grimsby's arms and legs all a-wiggle. Kennedy looked on, open-mouthed, curious, and uncomprehending. He might as well have been trying to make sense of naked mole rats running backwards or the ritualistic circling and genital pore alignment of the *Cornu aspersum*, culminating in the firing of the calcareous gypsobelum into whatever flesh is conveniently situated. Such was Kennedy's facial expression as the scene before him unfolded.

At last, up onto the plastic chair and right over the fence in ungainly fashion went Arbop, and — splash, glub — into the pond. Down he went, lost from view, lost to nothing, blue sky above like a bag and blackest murk below. Down and down and gone, gone, gone. On a far edge, beneath a mossy overhang, the mother of a fine crop of tadpoles watched the ripples calm and blinked.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Did you get it? Did you get it?”

Arbop couldn't answer yet. He was still catching his breath, having fallen out of the bottom of some kind of moist interface between possibilities. Dripping and exhausted, drinking in air like a man from the moon, he looked up in search of facts and narrative but saw only low-hanging clouds. He had a wet leather man bag slung over his shoulder, heavy as hell.

Everybody wanted an explanation, that much was clear just from everybody's body language. Arbop was surrounded by soldiers, not poets. Poets spoke sideways and had polysemic relationships with language. Soldiers needed everything to be clear and only one way. It's not that there weren't facts. There were plenty of facts. Stringing them together into a narrative, offering a clarity of meaning, well, that was something else again. Even if you tried to play it straight you ended up with a kind of fiction. You couldn't include everything. You couldn't avoid a point of view. You had stacks of contingent assumptions. You filled in more blanks than you even knew were there.

Everybody wanted answers. They wanted to know what the story was about.

“Come on, soldier, talk to me! Did you get it?”

Man, the commanding officer had a loud voice when he was agitated. *Quit yelling*, that's all Arbop wanted to say, but he kept it to himself.

“Hang on a sec,” is what he said, in ostentatiously quiet tones.

He undid the latch on his man bag and looked inside. There was a jar in there all right and it sure wasn't empty. The commanding officer started going grabby on him, reaching in, being rough. Arbop turned away and shoulder-blocked him, and gave him a hissing look.

Arbop expected the commanding officer's face to harden, and perhaps he also expected to receive a beating for insubordination. The officer was kinder or more wily than that. His face softened in apparent understanding as he took half a step backwards and prepared to deliver a ridiculous speech, the one he always gave.

"Listen, soldier," he said gently. "I know what you're going through. People die. We die. We die doing our jobs. None of us can ask for more than that in this crazy old war. Oh I know what's in your head. Hell, you think I'm not up screaming in the attic most nights myself? Shit. There's only one way through it, you know that. You've got to buck up, soldier. That's job number one. It ain't easy but you know what? You're not alone. We're brothers, brothers in arms. You've got so many brothers you've got to give them numbers instead of names!"

The commanding officer paused here to laugh hoarsely until he was coughing badly. He was a tough man who smoked a lot of cigarettes without regard for the consequences.

"I'm just kidding," he continued in a more subdued way. "I always make the worst possible joke in any awkward situation. Bank on it. Character flaw. Guilty."

"It's OK," said Arbop. "Buck up. It's a crazy old war."

"Good man," said the officer. "Now listen, soldier. I need you to hand me that brain."

Arbop reached into his man bag, grabbed the jar, and tilted it so he could see the contents. One brain.

"That's it," coaxed the officer. "Mission accomplished, soldier. We're hella proud, son."

Arbop clutched the jar tighter and looked up uncertainly.

"Well," he said, "what are you going to do with it?"

“That’s not your concern, soldier.”

“Yeah but I mean, what are you going to do with it?”

“I’m going to hand it up the line, that’s what I’m going to do with it, just like you’re going to do.”

“But what do they want with it? What’s it for?”

“Shit. That’s above my pay grade, soldier. What do you say you just hand me that jar and let’s get the hell out of Dodge now son? I don’t much like standing around out here in the open like this.”

“All right, all right,” said Arbop, but he was closing his man bag and starting to stand up. “Just give me a second here will you? Give me a little space here for one second. Phew. What a day.”

The officer stood back and allowed Arbop to stand up and brush himself off. After all, Arbop had been through something to get hold of that jar, something none of them really understood. If he needed a minute to get reoriented, he’d have that minute. It was the decent thing to do. The commanding officer folded his muscular arms across his commanding chest. An infantryman holding a rifle behind him spat, and the shadow of a crow flew across them on the ground. A distant laugh could be heard, a hundred metres away, an urban laugh, the laugh of somebody in a nice neighbourhood.

“Changed my mind,” said Arbop, darting off towards the town as fast as he could, gripping his man bag for all he was worth.

Because of their generalised confusion and the unexpected nature of the instructions, the men in Arbop’s unit were slow to follow the commanding officer’s orders to shoot him down. By the time it was widely understood that they were meant to fire their guns at their own fleeing compatriot, Arbop had gotten a

considerable head start towards the white buildings of the hot desert city. The men did a certain amount of looking at each other before firing, just to see if anybody else was really going to do it. A couple of them probably half thought about throwing their rifles down and running right after him, hoping to start a mass desertion, but you can never bank on a thing like that and few people will take that kind of a leap. You can't blame them. What if somebody yelled yee-ha and ran after him, lost in the exhilaration of pure freedom and the presumed annulment of all authority, only to find he was the only one so moved, the lone costumed reveller at a state funeral? In any case the moment had come and gone. If it had left the men without revolution, it had also left them without whatever it was that would have made them keen to shoot their friend in the back as he did what they all wished they were doing. They shot expertly and well over the head of Arbop in the finest tradition of equivocal warfare. One officer's darling, a real crack shot, zinged a wall just as Arbop disappeared around a corner, and then made a big show of chagrin at his near miss. His mates rolled their eyes as he grinned.

If you had asked Arbop to draw a map of where he was he'd have had a hard time coming up with anything that much resembled the actual layout of the city. Fortunately for him, this was no time for a reasoned approach to problem solving. It was exactly the kind of moment for which impulse and intuition were created, a moment to be seized rather than implemented. There was no time. He would have to yield to the sovereignty of the present moment, rely on all his previous preparations for everything else apart from this, cast out all the accumulated rubbish that smothered the jewel inside him, and shine. Also working in his favour: he had been in this alley before. Without making decisions, he let himself be pulled in directions. He remembered how to become two dimensional and slip into holes in walls, how to

occupy houses and speak to gentlemen. He found where the light wasn't and went into it.

Back in the reassuring darkness of the tunnel, having penetrated to a sufficient depth, he let himself whisper it once more: *Birdie*. Let them come, whatever they wanted, barbarians, pain, an overturning, let it happen, just get it on the table at last and be done. As if on cue, a man who badly needed a shave lit a cigarette, illuminating other unshaven faces, all of their moist eyes trained like rabbits on Arbop as he crawled towards them beyond caring. All of them were wearing hardhats except for Arbop, who still had on his soldier's helmet.

"Put that out!" shouted Dakka Budendeet, slapping cigarette man on the shoulder hard.

"Agreed!" stated another firmly. "It's foul."

There followed some general murmuring about it being a closed space with poor ventilation and some suggestions about how rude it was to create smoke without regard for the lungs and opinions of others. The offending man was cowed into submission, but he took it well, with a smile, as if he had only done it in the first place to elicit their objections. That's the sort of mischievously irritable man he was, and he was among men like himself.

"You're a bunch of pansies," he said, and everybody laughed, including Arbop.

With the match gone out it was, of course, very dark and delightfully cool in the tunnel. They sat in it without speaking for some time, the group of them, so it was as if they had accepted Arbop as one of them without so much as a single question. Thus Arbop found the silence gratifying and not at all awkward. Suddenly there was the unmistakeable sound of somebody sipping something.



“What’s that?” said one of the men.

“Who’s into the beaujolais?” said another.

“Aye, the beaujolais,” said Dakka Budendeet. “I can smell it.”

“It was me,” said a fourth man, lighting another match so everyone could see his sheepish grin.

“Typical,” said the first man.

“Well, light the candles,” said the second man.

The beaujolais sipping fourth man lit the two candles at the centre of their little group, giving everyone a shape and the tunnel an orange glow.

“Beaujolais?” said Dakka Budendeet, having taken the bottle in hand, to general assent.

Arbop accepted his gratefully and with good manners. Taking a sip, he decided to ask a question to investigate a certain suspicion that had arisen in his mind.

“Say,” he began out of the blue. “Have any of you men ever done any demolition work?”

The initial response only deepened his suspicions. It was wordless chuckling, and nobody seemed to feel obliged to use language.

“I mean I know you’re builders,” Arbop continued. “But you seem capable of so much more. I was just wondering if you’ve ever wrecked anything.”

It was only then that Arbop felt awkward because he remembered that he was a soldier and he was a guest in their country, and presumably he would himself have been associated with a certain amount of wrecking of all kinds of things. The builders could have made a choice comment or two, but they decently refrained.

“Are you looking to wreck something?” asked one of the men.

“No, not at all,” said Arbop. “I come in peace!”

They laughed politely. Even though it was a strange thing for Arbop to say, they understood that he meant it, and that individual soldiers could be distinguished from an army in general.

“What do you think we might have wrecked?” asked one of the men.

“Because the truth is we did it,” added Dakka Budendeet, to very raucous laughter that included Arbop.

Since Arbop himself wasn’t even sure what he was implying, he had no follow-up questions, just a general observation.

“I’m not sure why I even bring it up,” said Arbop. “It’s just that it seems like things have been collapsing all over the place lately, although now I mention it, I’m not even sure it’s here that I’m talking about.”

“Well, if it was wrecked, it was probably us,” said one of the men. “And if you need something wrecked, if we can’t do it, we probably know somebody.”

Everyone nodded at that.

“May I ask what you guys are working on?” said Arbop.

Everyone offered up a cacophony of mutually reinforcing statements about extending the tunnel, extending the tunnel, extending the tunnel. As to where?

“Australia,” said Dakka Budendeet, a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

There followed a short discussion of the problems of tunnelling through the centre of the earth, having to do with only going down until you were at the centre, at which point all directions were up. If you had a way to survive the mind-boggling heat and pressure, you’d float. That would be fun for a while but it wouldn’t get you through to Australia.

“I studied gravity,” said the one who had lit the cigarette.

Really? Never! That was the kind of thing several people said in response. You wouldn't look at him and think: scientist.

"Yes," he said, with slightly too much confidence. "I read a book on it."

Oh. A book. Nobody said anything. The man cleared his throat, and it was obvious he was getting ready to deliver his important conclusion.

"The thing about gravity," he continued, "is that it doesn't exist. There's no such thing. It's a false description of something else. The closer you look at it, the more you find contradictions, and finally the whole thing just disappears in your hands. That's how Einstein figured it out. He noticed the contradictions in what everybody else considered the facts. Then he just thought about it and came up with an entirely different kind of universe. He had a hell of an imagination."

Of course people objected. Arbop, for example, picked up a small stone and dropped it, as a demonstration, eliciting a few chuckles. Obvious examples of gravity's existence were offered, jokes were made about tin-foil hats.

"Go ahead and laugh," said the man, wounded. "It doesn't change reality. Gravity isn't a force. It doesn't have magical faster-than-light instantaneous effects across the whole universe. You're thinking of it all wrong."

"So what is it then?" asked Arbop.

"Mass and energy curve space-time, and objects in motion that appear to be drawn to each other are simply taking the shortest possible distance along the curvature."

That shut everyone up.

"Gravity is not a force," he concluded. "It doesn't exist. Curved space-time exists."

Nobody was sure what to make of his argument; neither was anyone prepared to offer a rebuttal. They did instinctively grasp that Newtonian equations would be accurate enough for their purposes and that none of the subtler ramifications — the bending of light, the delay in radio signals, the quirks in Mercury's orbit, certain behaviours of gyroscopes — would affect their tunnelling operation. The bottom line was that they believed they had worked out the main centre-of-the-earth problems simply by going a more circuitous route.

And the goal? Dakka and his group wanted to wear red scarves and high boots, cultivate disrespect, and join a purposeless secret Chinese society like Jacques Vaché.

"We are terrorists, you see," said Dakka Budendeet. "Good humoured and overly sentimental, but that is one of the types."

"Scoundrels," offered one of his compatriots, eliciting some nodding of heads.

"Scoundrels with a future," said Arbop, who felt like he wanted to be encouraging, wanted to show that he wasn't being judgmental.

"Just following our world-lines through space-time," said Dakka Budendeet.

They raised their glasses together and quietly sipped.

"By the way," said Dakka Budendeet, "that's not a brain in a jar is it?"

"Yes, it is," said Arbop, who had forgotten he was still carrying it. "I'm not sure what to do with it. I don't want it but you don't give it to just anyone. Do you need one?"

At this the men became thoughtful. Everyone present heard Arbop's name being called from a middle distance out in the streets. So: they were looking for him. Nobody said anything.

“This is actually why they’re looking for me,” offered Arbop, and everyone nodded but didn’t say anything.

“Human?” said one of the men, nodding at the brain.

“Oh yes,” said Arbop. “All too human.”

“We could build a monster,” suggested one of the men, reaching for the bottle to refill his glass. “Channel some lightning. In a laboratory.”

“But is it an abnormal brain?” asked another.

“No,” said Arbop, “nothing like that.”

All the men made wide, shallow, upside-down U’s with their mouths in thoughtful consideration.

“No,” said Dakka Budendeet decisively. “We don’t need any more brains.”

The men all nodded their agreement.

“We don’t have a hunchback, either,” said cigarette man, and everyone grunted at the truth of it, and because they didn’t know if hunchbacks were supposed to be funny or not.

“Perhaps it’s something a purposeless secret Chinese society might value?” asked Arbop.

“Aye,” said Dakka Budendeet. “Perhaps.”

The men took charge of the jar, and as they did so, Arbop’s memory of what the whole brain business was about began to fade along with his sense of what could account for his prior sense of urgency. But he clung to the notion that what had once seemed important might once again seem so.

“Is there some way out of these tunnels that I haven’t used yet?” asked Arbop.

“Oh most definitely,” said cigarette man.

Several of the men had suggestions about which way to try, but again it was Dakka Budendeet who spoke most confidently and, more importantly, had the clearest instructions. Arbop was to go a certain distance each time and always turn in the same direction, except for once, at the end. Arbop fixed the idea in his mind and bid the men a grateful and comradely farewell. Hands were shaken, and Arbop was off through the sneaky tunnels to give his pursuers every opportunity to call off the search with a welcome sense of futility.

The commanding officer, however, could not report back to his superiors without keeping the exercise going for a decent length of time, so he kept his men out in the field for several more hours, knocking on doors, meeting and greeting the locals, and pausing for refreshments in the local cafés. It was a long, pleasant afternoon for everyone.

Meanwhile Arbop made his way through the unfamiliar tunnels and when he finally lifted a manhole cover and poked his head up, there before him lay the smouldering ruins of his own city. Sitting in a prayer circle near what was once the Civic Centre were the men with the featureless faces, the Keratin Mob, prolate heads bowed in silence, each with an adondo and a mallet standing by. One couldn't help but notice all the spiders. Those that didn't lurk patiently in webs picked their way over the rubble like they owned the place.

One at a time, each keratin man picked up his adondo and began to beat it with his mallet. They were in no hurry about it. They seemed to be going for maximum hypnotic effect. At first therefore there was just the one drum beating in the silent city, and it was enough to make Arbop sit down and lose all ambition to do anything but sit and experience the moment with his fullest attention. It was pleasantly mournful. The second drum eventually joined in and there were two

drums beating in syncopation. These keratin men had rhythm. Arbop gave himself to it completely. By the time all ten of them were going it was like being suspended in a mid-air cushion of deeply resonant ping-pong balls, and the sun was going down.

They did not end one by one in subtraction, but rather all at once, quite precisely on the very same beat, creating a loudness that was both silent and full of bouncing feelings. It had been a long time. One noticed one's heart, one's ears, one's environment. The ruined city seemed still to be nodding its head, serene and dizzy. All was lost. All was fine.

The keratin men stood up like monks and gathered up their drums and bags. Without a word they filed into their waiting bus, and each one sat one behind another in a window seat on the same side, so that each bus window displayed a prolate head and one half of a hard and featureless face. The last one got into the driver's seat and drove: somebody had to do it. Arbop watched the motionless heads in a row roll away and disappear down the empty boulevard. It struck him as tragic and comical at the same time, so he smiled sadly until he felt an arm around his shoulders.

"We used to shoot pool here," said Effie with a sigh. "Remember?"

Arbop looked at his wife, and at all the colourful pieces of the city that lay around them.

"Those were the days," he said, giving her a squeeze. "They really were."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It was of course Yaro startling Arbop by knocking on his window.

“Why are you doing that?” she yelled at him.

“It’s none of your business,” said Arbop.

He had smashed his city to smithereens, kicking it to pieces, all of it, quite deliriously, even joyously, in a manner normally reserved for small, happy boys or the dangerously unbalanced. Now he was scooping up tiny colourful blocks one or three or even five at a time and tossing them into the plastic box they called home when not in use as part of some structure like his erstwhile tiny city.

“Come on,” she repeated. “Why are you ruining everything?”

“Just done with it.”

“Aw. You worked so hard on it.”

“Yeah. But.”

“Aw.”

“What do you care?”

“I don’t know.”

Arbop shrugged and went back to his scooping, but he left the window open and Yaro gaping. He took the roof off of one of the few buildings that remained partially intact, and four spiders crawled quickly out. They must have been hiding in there, terrified at the destruction of their city. They must have thought of it as their city. Despite the fact that he liked spiders, Arbop felt revulsion and pushed himself backwards so fast that he fell over. He looked up and expected to see Yaro laughing at him, but she wasn’t. She just looked thoughtful.

“Is that your spiders?” she asked.

He looked up at the window where they used to live.



“I guess so,” he said.

“Aw. You destroyed their home! Where they going to live?”

“They can always go back to the window. I’ve never minded.”

“Aw.”

“It’s better there. More light.”

“But they’ve urbanised.”

“You want them?”

“Nah.”

The spiders were well on their way to corners. Perhaps they’d end up back at the window — a little sense of space after their foray into tiny city living. Arbop had arrived at the last few blocks. He dumped them into the box until he held the last one in his fingertips. Here’s looking at you, kid, he thought, gave it a little kiss, and dropped it over the box. Until it hit, he whistled the sound of a falling cartoon bomb.

“Ba-boom,” said Yaro over the wooden sound of block hitting pile.

It was Sunday. He would enjoy the day in his apartment, free of tiny cities and with spiders on the loose, and at night he would get the Sunday night feeling and then he would sleep there, content in the knowledge that his wife had left him and his brother was dead. In the middle of the night it was likely that he would awaken and agree to have a wee-wee and probably step on a slug. He would have to deal with it and get back to sleep, and in the morning he would go to work forgetful. He would report to work and then go on patrol, protecting the perimeter from barbarians, steamfitters, secret societies. It was *giri*, his duty to society, and he would go forth as if participating in a Japanese puppet drama, trunkless, elaborately costumed, requiring multiple black-hooded invisible manipulators, and chanting his

own narrative at half his true size to the accompaniment of a small three-stringed lute. Nobody in, nobody out, nobody in, nobody out.

In the middle of the night he woke up. His body had a request for him and he agreed to it. He pretended it wasn't happening at first, and indulged in irrational hopes when he knew it wasn't going away. Inevitably he knew what he would have to do, and finally stirred in reluctant preparation for his journey to the bathroom.

Meanwhile Young Plumpus, most glorious limacoide, young, gnawed, mythological, had arrived from another realm on his mission to perform his exultant negation. There was no fear in him, and he was calm and princely. The music of millennia played in the background of his mind. The beginning and the end of the universe beckoned him, whispered to him, celebrated him, laughed with him. All of history stood behind him, having lifted him to this moment without being resentful in the least for all the trouble it had gone to in order to produce him and the conditions in which he now revelled. Hundreds of billions of black holes sang the very lowest notes and pulled at him, pulled at him, silently pulled at him, or rather lured him with the curviness of their space-time. In the still moist darkness he entered Arbop's apartment by means unknown, slid to the centre of the kitchen floor, and lay in impassive defiance between the man and his toilet, awaiting the heel of fulfilment.

Arbop sat on the edge of his bed and sighed. Finally he stood up. Where were his slippers? Nowhere. To hell with them. He'd go barefoot and the floor would be cold and it would be unpleasant. Hopefully the coldness of the floor would be the worst of it. Hopefully this wouldn't be one of those nights where one of those disgusting slimy creatures that don't belong indoors decided to get underfoot. Then there would be the horror and the disposal and the washing, the strangely excessive

washing, the touching-to-test and the disappointment, the revulsion, the scrubbing that takes a long time to work, and then at long last the towel drying and finally the forgetting. But hopefully not, hopefully not.

He made it out of the bedroom and across the living room without incident. The floor wasn't really cold until the kitchen linoleum came into play. With a pattern that unconvincingly simulated wooden floorboards, it was rolled down directly onto a concrete base. An unforgiving and unattractive floor: a floor one tolerated, rather than loved.

Arbop scanned the darkness at his feet for suspicious shapes, as was his habit. He did not possess superb night vision, therefore his scans were often unsuccessful, but he always tried, always hoped. On this occasion, by what seemed like luck but was really an inevitability, a function of mass and what we think of as gravity and velocity and time and rhythm, a physical necessity, the bright moon in the cloudless sky out of his kitchen window provided sufficient illumination to expose a serene little slug poised halfway between his washing machine and his cooker as if time and death and life itself did not exist. One would think to look at it that if it could drum, it would be drumming; if it could chant, it would be chanting; if it could sing unnerving ancient melodies from out of an Egyptian crypt, Arbop would have been frozen by them. As it was, Arbop had a dim sense that all of those sounds were indeed happening, only layered just out of phase with this reality, only vibrating the inaccessible in-betweens. Anyhow the stupid thing couldn't have been more in the traffic lane to the bathroom if it were trying to get squashed on purpose. Suicide by Arbop. But the path from illumination to perception and finally to action is fraught with peril and uncertainty.

It was such a near thing. Hit or miss. Arbop was far from fully alert. A variety of neurotransmitters were still inducing slow wave activity within his brainstem and basal forebrain arousal centres, so he was pretty sleepy. Another half-second and there would have been a mess of squelching. As it happened, at the last desperate moment, a signal reached his brain almost as if it had been sent by his toes rather than his eyes, as if his toe sensitivity extended slightly beyond the boundaries of the skin to include some sort of electrochemical aura of perhaps a few millimetres in depth. In any case, Arbop did notice, and extended his leg suddenly and awkwardly further in order to avoid having his foot land on the slug — a rare success in the humiliating tragicomedy of his ongoing nocturnal wee-wee narrative.

The sudden change in motion left him splay-legged and only still more or less upright by the grace of the sink against which he was able to brace himself. Although he knew that his position was ridiculous, he found a modicum of dignity in the fact that he had managed to catch an unwashed milk glass before it dashed itself against the brutal falsity of the wood pattern below. With as much elegance as he could muster, Arbop righted himself and straightened his pyjamas. He would remove this bastard slug without murder.

Young Plumpus felt the edge of the torn-off piece of cereal box wedge and slide under his toeless uni-foot, felt his suction tenacity wane and give up, felt himself lifted into the air as if borne upon an uncovered palanquin by mysterious servants. Was this the final journey? Was this indeed heaven? Events were now perfectly out of his control at last. No more waves of muscular contraction. No more slime. No more cabbage. Only yielding, letting go utterly, the final embrace of the void. Bless me, my ancestors, bless me great nothingness, and to my tribe I say revel

on, I say burn your surplus, burn your best, rave into the night, I kiss you, I kiss you, I kiss you.

Arbop took the slug out into his small back yard and chucked it over the fence into the alley beyond. He heard it moistly thud.

By the time proper morning came and Arbop had breakfasted and was brushing his teeth, he barely remembered any of it. He spared it no thought because before him lay a new day full of promises to keep or betray.

“You are up to something,” said Yaro, assessing him as he left for perimeter security detail.

“Who me?” said Arbop with a backwards glance.

At work, G wanted to speak to him on behalf of management. Arbop went around behind the counter and the two of them went to a back room. Grimsby stood in his spot in the background, practically invisible if you didn’t know where to look for him by now. G had a number of questions regarding Arbop’s thoughts on marriage and military service, where he felt he lay on the spectrum between individual agency and a kind of absolute structural determinism, how he might be able to distinguish truly free thought from mere selection of items off a menu prepared by language itself, why he had trust issues and occasionally demanded independent confirmation of various assertions, and what he thought his weaknesses were as a guardian of the perimeter.

Arbop answered to the best of his ability until G performed his next duty, which was to usher Arbop down a corridor for some much-needed water and testicle therapy, after which he felt like a new man.

“Let’s coffee up,” suggested G when the procedures were complete.

They walked together to the coffee kitchen and prepared their respective concoctions. As always, Arbop noticed G put his sugar in, and G noticed him noticing. As always, neither said anything about it. Arbop noticed that his whole existence was farcical and his job was a lot of nonsense. G felt it as well. They didn't say anything.

"City's still standing, right?" asked Arbop.

"Far as I know," said G, sipping.

*This is who we are.*

*This is how we feel.*

*And should that bubble rupture...*

"Do you know what?" said Arbop.

"What."

"I quit."

There was no decline of Arbop's job satisfaction, but a sudden transformation. From one tiny blow, likely emanating from his own left inferior frontal gyrus, a hollow mould was formed from which the image of a new Arbop was cast. What would normally have happened next would have been some documentation, an official notice period, some uncomfortable negotiations about annual leave that could well have resulted in an offer to cheat or squeeze the worker into stress positions, followed by cheery pretence and a bit of awkward cake in the communal room. All of this would create certain reverberations in the omni-connecting tendrils of the all-feeling universe that would linger for some time. However, in the present case, Arbop just turned on his slug-squooshers and left the building to survey the wreckage. He knew there had to be a lot of wreckage and he was prepared to imagine all of it if necessary.

Freed from his professional responsibility to go to his sector of the perimeter, Arbop went in that direction anyway, and with a keener interest than usual. Free falling along a curve to the very edge of the boundary, Arbop felt sick with myth and logic and was hoping to plunge into mystery and experience sordid hallucinations. The whole city, as far as he was concerned, was decimated, like somebody enormous had breached the perimeter just to kick it all down and put the pieces into storage boxes. The buildings were still there, and the people, and Arbop knew that they were, and that his erstwhile tiny city lacked magical abilities. But the big corresponding city was all kicked apart just the same. There were the arcades, empty, abandoned, no more crowds strolling to and fro, no more courtesans killing time, singing softly, caressing the cracks in the tabletops. No more disdainful indifference to pleasure, delights of chance, the frisson of an invitation to ecstasy, small glasses of Madeira, victims' voices, evidence of struggle, skulduggery, building societies, the promotion of confusion and surveillance. The steamfitters had been. That much was clear. Every manhole in the city blown sky high, none of the manhole covers ever coming down, all of them accelerating at an increasing rate that outstripped the insistence of gravity or its simulacrum. Every building flattened neatly within seconds, facilitating unusually long views across the urban landscape, views to the horizon, to the perimeter itself. Rats scurrying, steam geysers rising, perhaps the odd moan from under a pile of rubble but no rescue teams, just tourists taking self-portraits at arm's length, quickly hurrying by and flattening to slide into their procumbent hotels like printer paper in reverse. Car alarms in two dimensions ringing out from flattened cars. The smell of crushed hot meals and uncollected rubbish, and cats that were perfectly fine. You'd rather be a slug than a snail under these conditions.

What else? Arbop walked, surveyed, thought, pictured. In the silent dead city, a dreaming collective arises, returning forever just to relive more of the same. A few birds circling overhead. A pterodactyl? Nah, just the shadow of the history of everything that everyone has completely forgotten, layered on the history of everything that nobody ever noticed in the first place. Arbop imagined a hell that would consist of being forced to listen to everything you've ever muttered under your breath, every unkind swear, every objection you were too cowardly to say any louder, every private ugliness. You'd drop on top of a flat dead city and listen to it over and over on a forever loop, until it was inevitably interrupted by something: a cough in an alleyway, something emerging from a tunnel, a fork scraping a plate. A cult of puritans, advocating perjury, picks its way over the bones and seduces an assemblage of people with intimate promises on the grounds of a former indoor asphalt arena where people learned to ride bicycles. Perhaps there might be one surviving street cart serving halal gyros and cappuccino to perhaps a few surviving miracle customers hoarding whimsical commodities in bags on wagons. An unshaven man in an unseasonably heavy coat, hunched in a doorway, grimacing in the grip of an idea, combative but parrying his own blows, writing a better letter, building a better fetter, surprisingly good line drawings pinned up in his tent elsewhere in the city, invited by salonnières to tend towards medical authority. Cabarets rising to reclaim territory from cafés as centres of enlightenment. Arbop's beloved subway trains, enchanted into luxury, freed from tracks, a subscape mingled with words, filled with faded nymphs, indulgent scorn, vague mountebanks miming pain without suffering. A clean-up crew made entirely of spiders works at a distressingly unconcerned pace, and green buds and shoots already begin to emerge from cracks, even where thermal maps made from satellites will show temperatures



in oxygen-starved piles of rubble hot enough to melt promethium for inexplicable months on end, it's no mystery, extremophiles, the will to life, resilience, joy, love.

"I'm going to have to stop you right there, sunshine."

It was Grimsby who spoke, and G who stood next to him shrugging apologetically. Grimsby was holding a futuristic thing in his hand that was probably a weapon. They wanted Arbop in the skiff.

Everybody knew that a skiff was a SCIF, which was a Secure Compartmented Information Facility, so even though both Arbop and G had an urge to whisper it to the other one, neither one of them did. They contented themselves with another meaningful look. They liked the look of Grimsby's handheld device and wished they had one themselves.

Arbop didn't want to go to the SCIF. He'd pretty much rather go anywhere than seal himself into a SCIF with anybody's Grimsby for some hot lights, jarring angles, and sweat. You'd only go into a SCIF if people had secret things to say, there was no other reason. You'd go in there and the deal was that nobody could be eavesdropping, it was the one place in the world safe from surveillance, if you could believe that the people who built it had resisted the delirious temptation to plant just that one little bug, but you'd also have to presume somebody would have checked for that. Checks and balances, unless you couldn't trust anyone, and how could you? Who cares anyway? If you really want a thing to remain secret you don't tell anyone, full stop. If you had a secret so terrible that somebody had to know, only it had to be a certain somebody and nobody else, because nobody could be trusted but this one person in the SCIF with you, wouldn't it obviously turn out that this person could not be trusted either? He'd secretly be on the take, on the make, in on the job, even if he was a she, even if she had seemed so decent the whole time except when

you weren't looking, it always came out that way. If the visit wasn't voluntary, and this one wouldn't be, then either Arbop would be forced to listen to secrets he didn't want to know, or he'd have to say something he didn't want to say. Even if everyone just sat in silence, waiting, that would be even worse. Beyond awkward. There was so much implied coercion that Arbop suddenly wished he was a turtle. Or a snail. You'd rather be a snail than a slug in these circumstances. The whole scenario could scarcely be more frightening and unpleasant. Why would anybody treat another human being this way? Had he not been a loyal employee until suddenly quitting without even claiming his accrued annual leave? They could have it! This was madness. Was it about the perimeter? Arbop had defended it, sacrosanct and real, had been so earnest about his responsibilities that there weren't any residents of his sector who didn't find him in some way adorable. Had they found more of his things at the site of the absolutely flattened city? Maybe a giant set of his own flattened fingerprints? All of his trousers, pressed to suspicious perfection? If you want me to explain anything, I can't. If you say I'm complicit, you're right. It was me all along, me and me and nobody else but me. Please leave me alone. Please just let me go. Please somebody help.

There was a brief whistling sound and then a dart could be seen sticking out of Grimsby's neck. He crumpled to the ground unconscious. Arbop and G turned, mouths mirrored comically agape, and saw her, there she was: Yaro. She was holding a Tlacalhuazcuahuitl.

"Better get moving," she said, giving the blowgun a twirl and sticking it into her belt.

There were expressions of surprise and confused delight, even though Yaro now occupied the grown-up position and Arbop was in the helpless moron seat. But how, he exclaimed, and so forth, and why was G looking so pleased with himself?

G leaned in:

“I called in a ten thirty-three,” he said.

“What,” said Arbop, “on the guard line?”

“On the guard line!”

Arbop never knew you could call somebody’s guard on the guard line and declare a ten thirty-three. Yaro had gotten the picture all right, and just look at what she had done. Arbop looked at her and felt feelings swelling up and took short breaths and blinked his eyes many times to try to keep them dry. He knew what he wanted to do.

“Don’t even think about hugging me,” said Yaro.

And G. G had seen what was coming and he had known what to do.

“Me neither,” said G.

Under Yaro’s leadership there wasn’t any further nonsense on the journey. They proceeded, without even discussing the destination, to the very edge of the perimeter. The sun was high and cold and into its descent. The leaves were just beginning to turn. The three of them stood and looked around, enjoying the smell and the quiet. There was no hurry. It was nice at the perimeter, where the city gave way to wasteland and the forbidden. There was something about the air quality.

Yaro reached into her back pocket and pulled out a crumpled envelope, which she handed over to Arbop.

“Came today,” she said. “Letter from your brother.”

G rolled his eyes but felt dirty about it.

“Read it,” he said.

“It might be quite personal,” said Arbop.

“Come on,” said Yaro. “Read it.”

“All right,” said Arbop.

He opened the crumpled envelope and pulled out a crumpled letter. He crumpled the envelope even more and stuffed it into his own back pocket, and uncrumpled the letter, smoothing it out against his leg before holding it up and clearing his throat.

“Wait!” said G, and everyone stopped to look at him. “Sorry. I just feel like I’m not quite ready. This should be more of a ceremonial thing, you know what I’m saying? You feel that?”

“I feel it,” said Yaro. “It’s my fault. I pulled the letter out too soon.”

“Hey,” said G. “You had it, you pulled it. You don’t want to go forgetting.”

Yaro nodded, grateful for the understanding.

“Does anybody have any wine or anything?” asked Arbop.

Nobody did.

“We could have planned this better,” said Arbop.

“Who planned anything?” said G and everyone nodded.

“Let’s dance,” said Yaro.

“I don’t really — “ began Arbop.

“Or run,” interrupted Yaro, “or jump or scream. Let’s bust out. Just a few minutes. Let’s get our arms and legs going. Let’s feel crazy.”

“I’m down,” said G.

Yaro immediately busted out into full-fledged callipygian abandon, knees up high, arms flailing, hair whirling, and with vocalisations that seemed to Arbop like

they could have preceded an attack on a battalion of invading Spaniards. She had no inhibitions, not even when she was the only one moving for the first ten seconds.

G was next to get moving, albeit in a more understated way that suggested a kind of downtown funk. Elbows close, head bobbing. A foot forward, a foot back. Nice loose hips. Some sudden head turns and frozen moments. He stayed within a personal boundary space of perhaps two square metres, whereas Yaro was off in the trees and back again and away.

Arbop just ran. He stuffed the letter in his pocket and ran as fast as he could to see if he could run so fast, with so much energy, that he wouldn't have anything left for existing, that it might make him disappear. Whenever he felt he had reached peak speed, he jumped, and when he jumped, he yowled. Then he fell to the ground and grabbed up dirt and sticks and writhed and threw whatever he had in his hands as far as he could throw it. He put his hands down on the ground and kicked his legs into the air. If anyone had been watching, they'd probably have thought it a bit awkward, but nobody was, and to Arbop it all felt quite animal. He grabbed his ankles and rolled around like a human ball, left and right and nearly over his head, round and round and round.

This all went on until it eventually stopped. The three of them came together in a circle. Arbop made an abortive motion towards holding hands on either side of him but it came out as just a twitch that they all felt. Following G's lead, they grasped each other by the shoulders and exchanged frank looks full in the face before separating.

"Good job," said Yaro. "And now, here, in the bonds of this friendship, let us have a reading of the sacred letter in the open air by the perimeter."

"Amen," said G.

“I might get slightly choked up,” warned Arbop, producing the letter from his pocket and once more straightening it out against his leg. “I would prefer if you didn’t laugh.”

He cleared his throat and swallowed.

Dear My Brother Bodhamari Whom I Love,

I read a story the other day, it was in the newspaper, regarding a woman who threw herself out of a window of the fourteenth floor of a building, but you see, around the seventh floor, somebody inside looked out and saw her, and guess what: made eye contact. Is it an ending or an explanation, or just an immoral story? It’s not kind to bless those who curse you. The thirst of the unclean follows its affliction to haughtiness and then the will to death. Obscure hearts cluster around me and eternity begins with a garden, ancient lunatics and barbarous flowers making a few olden-day bugle calls. Unhinged in the darkness, in search of the infinite, a girl with bare arms and no fear receives hired killers and lackeys like a successful play unsigned by its author, her hair in a bright downpour of imponderable veils. Paroxysmal disturbances coincide indiscernibly with the exquisite taste of poison. Scramming like scattered breath to the outskirts of town away from thick mauve crowds and monster balloons to enjoy the pleasures of heartbreak. New moves or a new game? The limits themselves are the stakes.

Yours without instinct or denunciation,

I remain always your brother,  
Oliver

There followed respectful silence. Arbop folded up the letter and put it back in his pocket. Shrugged his shoulders.

“Cool,” said Yaro.

“What now?” asked G.

Arbop looked out beyond the perimeter and exhaled.

“There’s a tunnel entrance here,” said Arbop, indicating a hatch on the side of a gentle slope entangled with weeds.

“Lot of ways to go, in a tunnel,” said Yaro.

“Breaching?” asked G.

“Well,” said Arbop, “whatever I do, I’ll do it first and then decide.”

“That’s a one-way ride,” said G.

“Coming with me?”

Arbop held up his hands to mean none taken. He thanked G for his friendship and his help. They did a manly handshake that quickly turned into a manly hug and resolved into a manly shoulder clap. In the distance, towards the city, one could hear the shapes of the animals that come to the aid of children in fairy tales. One could smell the silhouetted combat of traumatophiles.

“Nah,” said G. “I got family to think about. No offence.”

He turned to Yaro next.

She laughed. He thanked her too, and offered admiration for her navigation and leadership skills. He knew she had taken risks and so forth, and he knew he was on his own now. And so was she. Yaro told him to shut up.

“Admit it,” he said. “You’ve been spying on me.”

Arbop looked at them one last time and nodded.

“OK,” he said. “I’m heading down into it.”

“Taking the dive!” said G.

“Yeah well,” said Arbop.

Arbop opened the hatch, winked, and dropped in. G and Yaro looked down in and watched him get smaller and smaller. Soon he would be tiny and then nothing.

“Hell,” said Yaro. “I’ll go along with him a little ways anyway.”

And she jumped in after him, much to his surprise.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was sitting up in his hospital bed, bouncing an index finger around between his lips and enjoying the sensation of warm saliva spilling up and over and out of his mouth. He had a big country grin on his face. The doctors stood frowning with their arms crossed. Jackie sat and wept quietly in an impeccable apricot wool bouclé skirt-suit with pearls and white elbow gloves.

Suddenly the door flew open and an orderly burst in rolling a metal cart bearing a large plastic bucket.

“I’ve got them!” he announced, as nurses and doctors went to action stations.

The lead doctor, an ace brain surgeon by the name of Nao, tore the lid off the bucket and looked inside. What she saw — wet, pink, and not unlike the muculent fruits of a long afternoon of shucking oysters — was a bucketful of left inferior frontal gyri.

“Jesus!” shouted Dr Nao. “There must be a hundred of the damned things in here.”

“Hundred and two, ma’am,” said the orderly.

“Are any of them my husband’s?” asked Jackie, leaning forward and nervously smoothing the edges of her elegant skirt.

“Maybe yes,” said the doctor, “and maybe no.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Do?” said the doctor, snapping on her latex gloves. “We’re going to try them all.”

“But that’ll take ages!” said one of the nurses, who was secretly hoping to get home early that day to bake scones for tea with his knitting group.

“Then we better get busy,” said the doctor. “Are you ready, Mr President?”



Kennedy stopped his finger bouncing and looked at her, clearly not understanding the question.

“Prep the patient!” shouted Dr Nao, and her team all scattered looking for their special gloves and masks.

Kennedy looked on, his smile broad and sunny. He turned to Jackie and winked.

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Part 2:  
The Terrorism Novel in a Surrealist Mode  
*Reflective Commentary*



“I take Sun Tzu’s wise words regarding war on pretty much the same level as a fortune cookie, but when it comes to the war on terror, then Sun Tzu here catches my breath. For it seems that the art of deception in this particular war is organic and built in to what is by necessity a war of error, a deliberate and compulsive lying, tied up with the fact that in the name of defending the people, which is to say democracy, the war is now against the people. We the public have become the enemy, and that is how I read Sun Tzu on the art of war today. Yet...the power of the art of deceit does not – I repeat not – necessarily weaken with exposure. Sometimes the very opposite occurs; sometimes deceit seems to thrive on exposure, as in the conjuring tricks of shamanism and in the conjuring now exercised on a global scale by the world’s only superpower.”

-- Michael Taussig  
*Zoology, Magic, and Surrealism in the War on Terror* (2008, p. S100)

“You have been treasonously consorting with the enemy,” he says...

“We are at peace here,” I say, “we have no enemies.” There is silence. “Unless I make a mistake,” I say. “Unless we are the enemy.”

-- J.M. Coetzee  
*Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980, p. 77)



## Introduction

The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd.

-- André Breton (2010 [1930])

I had just come back to New York, after twenty-odd years of living out of state. As of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, I had been living in western Queens – what I like to call Skyline Queens because of the view across the East River – for less than a month. On that brilliantly blue morning, I stood with a small instant community of crisis-bonded strangers on the elevated 7-train platform at 40<sup>th</sup> Street in Sunnyside and watched that skyline across a few miles of open air.

Two giant chimneys: two buildings with matching diagonal airplane-sized gashes, billowing a lot of smoke out towards Brooklyn. That's all it was at first. That's all we could see. The close-ups were left to our imaginations, but we were receiving news. One man with his ear plugged into a pocket transistor radio had become our public-address system, and he relayed astonishing reports that turned out to be wildly baseless: luridly speculative tales involving dozens of hijacked planes, reports that the Supreme Court had been hit, Los Angeles under attack, no end in sight. Anything could still happen. Why not thirty planes? Why not fifty? We made comments to each other, trying to locate the right New York attitude, some indeterminate blend of jaded, wry, and pissed off. Meanwhile we scanned from the Verrazano up to the Bronx, pensively looking for incoming aircraft, the next big hit. I cast a protective eye over the Empire State Building.

But then one of the towers suddenly and silently crushed straight downward into the path of most resistance in great feathery plumes of exploded concrete and

sun-bright twinkling sparkles of glass. All the way down at very near to the speed of dropped bowling balls. All the way gone.

That stopped all conversation immediately. It altered our consciousness. There were seven or eight of us standing there and we looked at each other just to confirm we had really seen it, that all of us had seen the same thing, the thing that couldn't have happened, the silent thing that must have thundered. Sickening unasked questions about numbers and unseen scenes of imagined chaos on the ground began to form in our minds, but could not quite dislodge the primacy of that immediate, visceral gambler's sense of improbability. Something unfair and uncanny had happened. We beheld the new single-tower skyline in silence. It made no sense, but there it was.

And then of course it happened again.

We looked at the emptiness, towers now of pure smoke. No words were spoken, we were beyond the linguistic: post-predictable, maps discarded, in a dream-like bubble none of us were up to popping. We existed in a shared new imaginary, a dizzying overflow of the real and the unreal, fact indistinguishable from fiction, conscious wrestling with unconscious, rational with irrational, the whole city seemingly gone as mute as we had, the 7 trains suspended in both directions, no horns honking, New York discontinued.

That infusion of the dream-like into the real, the sense of a suspension of disbelief and of time, even as events proceeded with stunning rapidity, continued, in my view, with the startling rise of the total surveillance national security state in the too-immediate aftermath of the inciting incident. That bubble of an unreal real seems to persist, its torture-testimony resistant to the power of language. There is no more argument. There are no more facts. There is only with or against.

My novel, *The Science of a Single Cabbage* (henceforth *Single Cabbage*), is in substantial part a considered reaction to my experience on the 7-train platform that morning and how it has conditioned my interpretation of subsequent events – the War on Terror, the curtailing of civil liberties, the proliferation of competing, irreconcilable narratives – up to and including the arrival of the so-called “post-truth” or “fake news” age and the presidential election of Donald Trump. In an attempt to capture the dream-like sensibility I experienced and to convert it into a literary aesthetic that defies clear distinctions between the real, the purported, the simulated, and the imagined, I have employed what I shall refer to as a surrealist mode of writing.

With the foregoing as background, the research question to which my novel responds is this: Can a surrealist writing mode help expand the terrain of the literary terrorism novel, e.g., by multiplying uncertainties related to the national security ontology of capitalist realism? It is the confluence of a surrealist mode and the contemporary terrorism novel that is at the heart of my claim to an original contribution to the carving out of a literary space that contests the national security state’s claims on realism.

Why a “surrealist” mode? *Single Cabbage*: a) richly indulges the signature surrealist fascination with the interplay of dream-life and conscious experience, b) manifests abundant, playful black humour (*l’humour noir*, a term coined by André Breton); c) shares a political sensibility akin to surrealism’s anti-fascism; d) extends surrealism’s sustained engagement with noir forms and spectacular crime (Eburne 2008) into the world of terrorism; and e) exploits paranoia’s ability to create “systematized confusion” that is “corrosive to reality” within a public “symbolic



space [that] has lost its innocence,” as did the likes of Salvador Dali and René Crevel in the 1930s (Eburne 2003, p. 107,109).

Dreams, black humour, anti-fascism, crime, and paranoia: five central preoccupations of both surrealism and my project. Of these, the reality-contesting use of dreams is probably most often associated with surrealism and is probably the single most essential element of a surrealist literary mode. I propose that “dreaminess,” alone or in combination with one or more of the other elements, can lend a certain surreal effect to a work of literature, but that the effect becomes more pronounced with the inclusion of more of these elements. We might, in other words, encounter a “weak” or a “strong” surrealist mode. A work exhibiting only one or two of surrealism’s signature elements might or might not represent a surrealist mode, depending upon how extravagantly the surrealist touch was deployed; other descriptors might be more relevant. With all five of these signatures in evidence I think that it is fair to describe a work as written in a surrealist mode. I don’t suggest that the list is exhaustive, only that they are five core strands of surrealist thought that I have identified as being represented in my novel. These are fluid and overlapping elements, to be sure, variously applying to the techniques and the ethos of a surrealist literary mode.

In making my case for *Single Cabbage* contributing to an expansion of the terrain of the contemporary terrorism novel by bringing a surrealist mode to bear, my discussion will consider all five signature elements from both technical and ethical perspectives. In exploring the issue of what constitutes a surrealist literary mode generally, I will focus mainly on dreams and black humour since they are the techniques predominantly employed in *Single Cabbage*. In exploring what a surrealist mode brings to the terrorism novel in particular, I will focus more on the

ethos, and the ways that anti-fascism, crime, and paranoia infuse *Single Cabbage*'s aesthetic sensibility. Plainly, the division into ethos and technique is no more a clean one than the parcelling out of elements between them. All these borders will prove porous. Yet I hope, as rough as it is, this approach will lend a useful structure to my argument.

I must also note at the outset that my reference to the term "surrealism" is not intended to be limited specifically to André Breton's historical movement and its ever-shifting (and usually dwindling) formal membership. Rather, proceeding from the notion that "a state of mind survives" the surrealist school (Blanchot 1995 [1949], p. 85), I'm trying to locate an affinity within a more generously defined, yet still coherent, set of ideas and practices, predominantly originating in surrealist thinking but inclusive of related ideas from the movement's heirs, precursors, renegades, critics, competitors, and usurpers.

For example, when Jean Baudrillard describes a hyperreality that "can no longer dream" because images have become indistinguishable from the real "as though things had swallowed their own mirrors" (Baudrillard 2008, p. 4), one can, without going so far as to theorize a grand unified neo-surrealism, identify a certain specular resonance with Louis Aragon's statement in *A Wave of Dreams*, that "[t]he only way to look at Man is as the victim of his mirrors." (2010 [1924]).

Situationism, with its rise of the "spectacle" or the image over the real (Debord 2010 [1967]), was a way of "relaunching surrealism on a new foundation" (Wollen 1993, p. 120). From there it's a straightforward extension to Baudrillard's hyperreality and simulacra, which can be seen not only as further elaborations upon Debord (Hussey 2001) but as Baudrillard trying "to outdo the surrealists by locating the unreal 'in the real's hallucinatory resemblance to itself'" (San Juan Jr. 2004, p. 124).

This is not to argue that there are not at the same time important distinctions between surrealism and other disciplines that share some conceptual strands. In making such connections, I hope simply to contextualize my novel within a living mode of thought that can be seen in the spirit of carrying on the “unfinished project of surrealism” (Bryson 2000). This “surrealist mode” then is a term of convenience under whose umbrella resides a correlative association of dreams, the unconscious, the irrational, and the absurd. Among its aims is an interrogation of socially and psychologically constructed reality, with a particular interest in transgressing taboos in order to expose and disrupt the processes that establish the boundaries of the conceivable.

While *Single Cabbage* (like all novels) can be read in a number of different ways – e.g., as an alienated man’s coming to grips with various kinds of loss; as an exploration of myth, perception, and the elusiveness of the real; as social commentary or Menippean satire – I think “terrorism novel” is a lens that especially privileges the contributions of a surrealist mode of writing. Seeing *Single Cabbage* as a terrorism novel in a surrealist mode highlights all five of the signature elements I have identified. The novel generously employs absurdity and black humour in, for example, the nature of the surveillance society depicted, but simultaneously keeps the critical focus on the interplay of the internal with the external, having as much to do with perceptions and how they are shaped by the unconscious as with any evisceration of institutions, ideologies, or mythologies.

Chapter One provides some boundaries and clarification of the “impoverished real” (Lethem 2015) to which *Single Cabbage*’s surreality is implicitly opposed, suggesting that the combination of perceptual idiosyncrasies,

narratives, expectations, and beliefs that form our baseline assumptions may be less reliable than we generally suppose.

Chapter Two will detail what I mean by a surrealist mode. It will elaborate upon the importance of the unconscious and dreams – the blurry liminality between the real and the imagined – and the employment of black humour as they pertain to my novel. It will explain why I see surrealism as a relevant reference point for what I’m attempting with my project. I shall compare/contrast *Single Cabbage* with other works that, I will argue, exhibit elements of a surrealist literary mode and help describe the mode’s contours. Works considered in this context primarily include *Les Champs Magnétique* (Magnetic Fields) by André Breton and Philippe Soupault, *Froth on the Daydream* by Boris Vian, *The Third Policeman* by Flann O’Brien, *Chronic City* by Jonathan Lethem, *The Hearing Trumpet* by Leonora Carrington, and *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon.

Chapter Three moves the discussion of writing in a surrealist mode to a specific focus on the terrorism novel, and will elaborate upon the other three signature elements – anti-fascism, crime, and paranoia. In so doing, it will contextualize *Single Cabbage*’s approach alongside historical and post-9/11 terrorism novels selected for the ways in which they disturb both terrorism discourse and our sense of reality. Not all of them reflect a surrealist literary mode in themselves, but each at least contains narrative-disrupting elements of the kind that *Single Cabbage* tries to extend in a surrealist direction. Works considered under this rubric primarily include *The Eater of Darkness* by Robert M. Coates, *Bleeding Edge* by Thomas Pynchon, *The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad, *The Assignment* by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Mao II* by Don DeLillo, *El Señor Presidente* by Miguel Asturias, *The Safety Net* by Heinrich Böll, and *How German Is It?* by Walter Abish.

Three novels that deal explicitly with an uncovered terrorism conspiracy known as Operation Gladio – *Gladio: We Can Neither Confirm Nor Deny*, by Steve Chambers, *The Lone Gladio*, by Sibel Edmonds, and *Numero Zero* by Umberto Eco – are considered in the section about paranoia in a surrealist literary mode.

Thus, this commentary comprises a two-part argument: firstly, that *Single Cabbage* can justly be described as embodying a living, still-relevant mode of writing whose roots can be located in surrealist thought; and secondly, that this surrealist literary mode, as demonstrated by *Single Cabbage*, is a particularly useful, yet under-utilised approach to bring to bear on the terrorism novel in an age of total surveillance and narrowing civil liberties.

Chapter Four, by way of conclusion, will briefly summarize my argument and reflect on what the approach I have adopted can hope to achieve.

First, however, a brief synopsis of *Single Cabbage* will help to inform and contextualize all that follows.

## Synopsis

*The Science of a Single Cabbage* is a work of literary fiction: a surreal, dark, paranoid, and comic novel that interfuses the real and the delusional into a dreamlike whole. It is set in a high-security city suffering from a series of absurd events that are presumed to be terrorist attacks. Monuments wobble, buildings crumble, the entire city begins to disintegrate. Bodhamari Arbop is a security agent who has lost his wife and his brother, and who also loses a mysteriously increasing number of his toes. His job is to protect the city's perimeter and to find out who is responsible for these insults to the city's integrity. When every trail he follows leads back to himself, he begins to notice that his reality is full of holes – and some of them lead to tunnels full of surprises.

Arbop has built a miniature scale model of the city out of blocks in his bedroom, from which sounds, smells, and the odd bit of smoke sometimes emanate. Closer inspection results in immersion in that tiny world of war and the carnivalesque. In a similarly shadowy way, he also periodically inhabits a calmer world where John F Kennedy (whom Arbop has accidentally saved from assassination) is always president and always young. But the real and the unreal are inseparable: slugs from Kennedy's allotment garden can end up in Arbop's real kitchen, and if Arbop knocks over some blocks in his tiny city, the corresponding real buildings might fall.

Even as it gets harder to tell where dreams end and reality begins, Arbop is able gradually to reclaim not only his toes, but also knowledge of what happened to his brother and his marriage. In the end, standing at the edge of the ruined city, he disappears into a tunnel for the last time, unsure whether it will lead him beyond the forbidden perimeter to a lonely freedom, or just into an indeterminate darkness.

*Single Cabbage* presents a quest for both a personal and a political real, while reflecting current concerns about total surveillance, indefinite detention, xenophobia, and terror. The novel derives its name from a discussion of realism versus nominalism by Terry Eagleton (2012). Eagleton's starting point is to rehearse metaphysical questions of whether universal categories (e.g., "giraffeness" as opposed to particular giraffes) have an existence that can be called real in some sense, or whether they exist only as mental constructs. The realists are those who believe in the universals: "There can be no science of an individual cabbage, as opposed to a science of the genus as such" (Eagleton 2012, p. 3). A "science of a single cabbage" seems a declaration in favour of the impossible: an absurdist counterpoint that strikes a comic note at once defiant and deranged. It captures something of the tone of the novel. But it also implies a defence of the cabbage who doesn't want to go along with the rest of the crop.

Realism in the sense of universal categories has little direct relevance either to literary or to capitalist realism, thus my title's implicit anti-realism is in that sense misplaced. Yet, as Eagleton notes, sciences of "the sensory particular" do exist, and he gives aesthetics and phenomenology as examples (Eagleton 2012, p. 3). These considerations, with their invocation of subjective emotional and sensory values and their privileging of experience and consciousness, suggest additional thematic layers that are reflected in the novel. Furthermore, Eagleton's ensuing elaboration of abstract essence as a constraint on any posited omnipotent creator leads from cabbages to a question that is very much at the heart of my project: "Is the price of freedom the loss of reality?" (Eagleton 2012, p. 6) In the following chapter I will discuss the sense in which I use the term "reality" as something from which a surrealist mode attempts to free us.

## Chapter 1: Reality and Surreality

My argument (that *Single Cabbage*'s application of a surrealist mode usefully expands the terrain of the terrorism novel) contains an implicit presupposition that something may be amiss with our usual perceptions of reality. Surreality, after all, opposes itself to "ordinary" reality. The present commentary will benefit from some brief clarification and boundary-setting regarding the reality that is the target of the novel's attack.

The kernel of the proposition is that the facts of perceived reality are, to some uncertain degree, fictions. They include elements that are variously constructed, edited, imposed, fabricated, incomplete, and unreliable. What we take to be the manifest givens of reality might therefore reflect anything from mild bias to radical illusion. I do not presume to have a better handle than anyone else on what reality really is, nor do I hope to make a novel contribution in these pages to this area of philosophy. My aim is to sketch out the aspects of so-called reality that are both prone to distortion and pertinent to *Single Cabbage*. In so doing, I hope to ground my explanation of why I think a surrealist mode is a particularly appropriate artistic response to the current times.

Illusions may arise from a combination of the inherent vagaries of perception and the effects of expectations, culture, and propaganda. It is difficult usefully to separate internal filters from external data since they form an interdependent system of reality creation. *Single Cabbage* is concerned with the effects of assumptions on both a personal and a societal level. I will begin this brief discussion with some general comments on perception and bias before considering some specific issues having to do with capitalist realism and the national security state.



### 1.1 Perception and Bias

I was once able to spend several hours in the company of a friend without having him notice at any point that I had shaved off the right half of my moustache midway through the evening, even though he made direct eye contact with me numerous times throughout our conversation. Although his eyes were plainly presented with an incompletely moustached face, his perception of reality was blithely unaffected until I eventually pointed it out to him. Both of us found the experience unsettling.

It's a bit like the "invisible gorilla" experiment (Chabris and Simons 2010), more formally known as the "selective attention test." The test involves watching a video that shows a group of people passing a basketball around. Half of the players wear white, the other half wear black. Viewers are instructed to count how many times the ones in white pass the ball. As the video proceeds, a person wearing a black gorilla suit makes his way quite obviously across the screen, even pausing at centre stage to beat his chest. Surprisingly, an average of half the viewers completely fail to notice the spectacle of the incongruous gorilla because they're too busy concentrating on white uniforms and counting passes. The researchers call it "inattention blindness" (Chabris and Simons 2010, p. 6). I regret to report that I must count myself among those who so failed.

Innumerable additional examples could be offered of illusions that implicate our senses and the way our brains process the data with which it is provided. We may see things that are not there or fail to see things that are, or we may be sure the moon appears larger near the horizon than it does high in the sky when measurement proves us wrong. Galileo's stubborn belief in a quite enormous and entirely non-

existent “Bohemian crater”<sup>1</sup> on the moon (Westerhoff 2010, p. 31ff.) inspired my decision to use that phrase to describe a certain tunnel in *Single Cabbage*.

Some illusions are the merely trivial effects of our brains’ clever habit of filling in gaps for us in a normally useful way. Some, however, reveal “the dependence of what we perceive on our beliefs and assumptions” and that “such beliefs do not have to be explicit” in order to affect our perceptions (Westerhoff 2010, p. 40). This recognition raises questions about the ways our predilections and limitations might be conditioning our experiences of reality in ways both small and large without our conscious awareness. To what extent might all our perceptions of everything from urban environments to large-scale political events be similarly contingent upon obscure transactions among our beliefs, myths, ideologies, and misdirected attentions? If we can effectively project our expectations onto the external world, it is reasonable to wonder how much of reality is conjured like dreams by our unconscious minds. It is a thought that exists in tension with the idea that we live in a rational age of science and reason. This tension is among the factors that gave rise to the surrealist movement, and *Single Cabbage* employs a surrealist mode to explore it via an interfusion of the real and the imagined.

From this suspicion that our understanding of reality relies upon more than just the conscious and logical parts of our brains arises another suspicion, shared by surrealism and critical theory: that post-Enlightenment instrumental rationality is a dangerously narrow and misleading construct. For all the liberating power of science over superstition, for example, there is also a sense that the same thinking that

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<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested that Galileo’s Bohemian Crater may have been a substantially exaggerated version of the quite real crater now known as Albategnius (Shea 2000).

devalues myth leads to a loss of meaning and values, and to an impoverishment of life by a perspective skewed toward the utilitarian.

If the ways and means of life are to be judged in terms of use-value, the question of whose ends are to be served is raised. Horkheimer and Adorno's observation that "[p]ower confronts the individual as the universal, as the reason which informs reality" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], p. 16) is amplified by Breton's identification of "the 'reign of logic' as the principal means employed to suppress the imagination's innate rebelliousness" (LaCoss and Spiteri 2003, p. 7).

The surrealist resistance to the cultural tyranny of narrowly instrumental reasoning begins as an opportunity for an individual's private mental processes. Herbert Marcuse noted the phenomenon of the "absorption of ideology into reality" (Marcuse 1991 [1964], p. 11); he was also among those who linked Breton's movement to Frankfurt School thought, arguing that "the surrealist effort...is more than a mere enlargement of our perception, imagination, reason...[it is also intended] to undo the mutilation of our faculties by the established society and its requirements" (Rosemont 1989a, p. 40).

*Single Cabbage* employs the absurd and the irrational to highlight the difficulties of distinguishing real from unreal and to disturb thought patterns and logical expectations. The artistic philosophy here can be described as the inverse of the notion of getting a grip on reality; it is an effort to break reality's grip on us. In other words, the idea is to free our minds from the constraints of expectations and conditioning in order to multiply possibilities. This effort does not necessarily imply a wholesale rejection of rationality. Indeed it can be described as an attempt to improve rationality rather than to discard it.

## 1.2 Capitalist Realism and the National Security State

The setting of *Single Cabbage* in an oneiric high-security urban space layered in unreality was chosen in part as a response to the limitations on imagination imposed by capitalist realism. Capitalist realism can be understood as part of what Gilles Deleuze recognizes we have become since World War II: a “society of control” in which the “family, the school, the army, the factory are no longer the distinct analogical spaces that converge towards an owner – state or private power – but coded figures – deformable and transformable – of a single corporation that now has only stockholders” (Deleuze 1992, p. 6).

Mark Fisher has noted that over several decades, especially in the United States, “capitalist realism has successfully installed a ‘business ontology’ in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business” (Fisher 2009, p. 17, emphasis in the original). I am arguing that capitalist realism has also installed a “national security ontology” in which it is a given that civil liberties must be sacrificed because of terrorists who “hate our freedoms” (Bush 2001) – a rationale not unlike that used during the Vietnam War vis-à-vis the provincial capital Ben Tre, when “it became necessary to destroy the town to save it” (Arnett 1968). This is the kind of absurd irony that draws me as a writer to this material. The crucial point is that capitalist realism is totalizing to the extent that it precludes even imagining alternatives. An aphorism attributed to both Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson captures this notion: “It is now easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fisher 2009, p. 2).

Noting first how readily capitalist realism co-opts resistance and various challenges to its dominance and turns even nominal anti-capitalism into viable products<sup>2</sup>, Fisher puts his finger on the one thing that might unravel its tapestry:

If capitalist realism is so seamless, and if current forms of resistance are so hopeless and impotent, where can an effective challenge come from? A moral critique of capitalism, emphasizing the ways in which it leads to suffering, only reinforces capitalist realism. Poverty, famine and war can be presented as an inevitable part of reality, while the hope that these forms of suffering could be eliminated easily painted as naive utopianism. Capitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's ostensible 'realism' turns out to be nothing of the sort. (Fisher 2009, p. 16)

One of the ambitions of *Single Cabbage* is to take a literary approach to the task that Fisher suggests by rendering uncertain the givens of the national security ontology, which may rest on grounds that are far flimsier than is generally acknowledged. It attempts to exploit what Hannah Arendt called "the curious contradiction between the totalitarian movements' avowed cynical 'realism' and their conspicuous disdain of the whole texture of reality" (Arendt 2013 [1951], p. viii). This approach invokes internal as well as external factors, closely echoing classical surrealism's concern with the psychological aspects of liberation. Surrealist anti-fascism is directed not only against fascists, but also against the "internalization of boundaries that the State has put around freedom," as Donald LaCoss put it in examining the importance of Fourier's thinking for André Breton (LaCoss 2003, p. 291).

Interrogation of "general acknowledgement" and acceptable "boundaries" is an interrogation of the "big Other": Jacques Lacan's proposition of a symbolic order or collective fiction that represents the official narrative of what can and cannot be

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<sup>2</sup> For example, as Fisher notes, films in which greedy Wall Street executives are the villains are very popular, but may induce "interpassivity" – a state in which audiences remain politically inactive and allow the films to act out criticism and rebellion on their behalf.

(openly) admitted or believed in a given society<sup>3</sup>. The big Other is the uncritical “consumer of PR and propaganda” (Fisher 2009, p. 44-45), required to believe things that individual society members are free to reject, at least privately. It also establishes society’s taboos, those areas into which the big Other is required not to venture. The discrepancy between what is actually known and what the big Other is allowed to know is a source of both tension and release for a society, enabling it to function but containing the seeds of its potential undoing. “In spite of all its grounding power, the big Other...exists only in so far as subjects *act as if it exists*” (Žižek 2006, Kindle location 185, emphasis in the original). The possibility of undermining capitalist realism’s realism, the task that *Single Cabbage* embraces, relies on exposing the big Other’s givens and subjecting them to enquiry.

The implication is that the big Other’s narratives, to some uncertain degree, include fictions intended to sustain a social mythology along the lines, for example, of American Exceptionalism (Duquette 2013) or capitalist realism. The extent to which the big Other represents a fundamental deception is an open question. Certainly Fisher’s argument is predicated on the expectation that the deception is fundamental, far-reaching, and insufficiently questioned. This possibility suggests a notion that *Single Cabbage* seeks playfully to engage: that society – particularly American society – might be suffering from what one might call “cultural gaslighting.”

Gaslighting became a psychological term of art in therapy in the 1980s and is now fairly common in colloquial usage (Abramson 2014). Deriving from the 1944 film *Gaslight* (and/or the play that preceded it), the term denotes the imposition of a

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<sup>3</sup> Lacan was “greatly influenced by [the surrealists’] writings on psychoanalysis and paranoia” (James 2009, p. 54), and his first published work appeared in the surrealist journal *Minotaure* (Lacan 1933).

false reality, “a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds—paradigmatically, so unfounded as to qualify as crazy” (Abramson 2014, p. 2).

Extending this concept of gaslighting to a cultural level goes beyond the usual jaded recognition of corruption, e.g., the expectation of a certain amount of lying and greed among our politicians. Cultural gaslighting implies a more total hoodwinking at the level of capitalist realism or a national security ontology, an imposition of a whole set of ersatz socio-political assumptions. Examples might include the constant invocation of false threats (Ponsonby 2005 [1928]), significant examples of which have been exposed: the Soviet missile gap never existed (Licklider 1970); the Gulf of Tonkin incident did not happen (Moïse 1996); Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction (Ritter 2005). The question becomes: Are these anomalies within a generally trustworthy narrative, or ruptures that reveal a hidden, fundamentally different reality? Or are such questions “utterly without grounds” – is it crazy to ask?

Say: This is real, the world is real, the real exists (I have met it) -- no one laughs. Say: This is a simulacrum, you are merely a simulacrum, this war is a simulacrum -- everyone bursts out laughing. With forced, condescending laughter, or uncontrollable mirth, as though at a childish joke or an obscene proposition. Everything to do with the simulacrum is taboo or obscene, as is everything related to sex or death. Yet it is much rather reality and obviousness which are obscene. It is the truth we should laugh at. You can imagine a culture where everyone laughs spontaneously when someone says: ‘This is true’, ‘This is real’. (Baudrillard 2008)

Despite the chequered history of official claims preceding and during wartime, scepticism among mainstream journalists has not become notably more prevalent (see for example Carden 2017). When assertions of dire new threats are made, to use Baudrillard’s phrase, “no one laughs.” *Single Cabbage* problematizes

this lack of laughter. Its application of a surrealist literary mode to multiply uncertainty is, in this light, ultimately not so much an attack on facts and rationality as a search for them.

There is another side to this coin. If one risk is that insidious fictions have distorted the political imaginary, the opposite risk is sliding down a slippery slope of paranoid delusion. Like the gap between what people can know and what the big Other can know, the territory between sober scepticism and spurious fantasy belongs to the creative ground that *Single Cabbage* seeks to exploit. The issue has particular resonance for the national security state with reference to the relationship between intelligence agencies and terrorist groups, which can appear to be a maddening “hall of mirrors” in which we variously train, establish, welcome, infiltrate, and support our nominal enemies by calculations that are either ruthlessly cynical or have gone very much awry, or both (see for example Sanger 2012 ; Mekhennet 2014 ; Ahmed 2015 ; Cartalucci 2015 ; Fisk 2015 ; Milne 2015 ; Norton-Taylor 2015 ; Porter 2016).

I hope from the foregoing description it begins to emerge how the signature elements of surrealism I have identified as shared by my writing mode might work well together in a novel to create a dreamlike and paranoid world, employing black humour to disturb comfortable notions of the personal and political real. Henceforth, when I refer to reality as the target of a surrealist literary mode, I am using the term as a shorthand for a combination of the imposition and introjection of the big Other, with all of the psychological, cultural, and political filters described above. I turn now to a discussion of each of the five shared signature elements in turn.





## Chapter 2: A Surrealist Mode of Writing

Referring to the American novelist Chester Himes's 1950s crime novels for surrealist Marcel Duhamel's *Série Noire*, Jonathan Eburne identifies "what might be called a vernacular surrealism...an involvement in French, and particularly surrealist, thinking about modes of writing that frustrate instrumentality through their irretrievable lapses and excesses of meaning" (2008, p. 246-247). Speaking of surrealism as a *mode* of writing echoes "modern satire theory [which] has recognized the futility of trying to establish the generic boundaries of satire, but views satire as a 'mode' (Connery and Combe 1995, p. 9) of writing, a 'frame of mind' (Knight 2004, p. 7) and 'an "open" form' (Griffin 1994, p. 186)" (Heiler 2010, p. 55-56). Surrealism in this sense, like satire, is less a fixed genre unto itself than a mode of expression that can inhabit any host genre, can appear and disappear, can be finely or grossly employed. Surrealism also shares with satire certain tactics in exposing absurdity through imaginative juxtaposition, yet "it differs widely from satire in that it is essentially poetic. Surrealism is the metaphysical poetry of satire." (Davenport 1997, p. 85-86)

As such, I understand a surrealist mode not as a fixed set of practices, but as an impulse that combines art and philosophy in an attempt to nullify any constraints on the freedom of the imagination. Surrealism in this sense exceeds its incarnation as an historical movement. Georges Bataille was insistent on the point of "a larger surrealism" (Bataille 2006 [1994], p. 86), that is, a surrealism freed to adapt, whose essence is that of the perpetually renewing and "self-shattering" sovereignty of the present moment (Hirsch 2014, p. 289). His description is consistent with André Breton's own characterisation of surrealism as "the unique opportunity we still have to regain our *raison d'être*...restored to [our] original sovereignty and serendipity"

(Breton, Sieburth et al. 1994, p. 143). Surrealism represented “a perpetual crisis in consciousness whose methods changed as the movement’s participants changed” (Eburne 2008, p. 5).

Louis Aragon also invokes the principle of constant renewal in announcing surrealism to the world as the “offspring of frenzy and darkness [in which] each image on each occasion forces you to revise the entire Universe” (Aragon 1994 [1926], p. 65). Belgian surrealist Paul Nougé, too, emphasized the principle of renewal through crisis: “Let man go where he has never gone, experience what he has never experienced, think what he has never thought, be what he has never been. But help is called for here: such departures, such a crisis, need to be precipitated, so with this in mind let us create disconcerting objects” (as quoted in Vaneigem 1999 [1977], p. 54).

What is at stake in this poetic impulse goes beyond the efforts of a formal movement of certain artists during a particular span of years: resistance to habits, to the narrowing of expectations, to the deadening of an open, vigorous state of readiness; re-creation of self, perception, and possibility in each successive instant; development of the full range of imagination’s capabilities. No historical circumstance has rendered irrelevant Bataille’s assertion of “the profound viability of the whole [surrealist] ferment which continues today...a profound intolerance for the sense of humiliation which is demanded every day of our human nature and to which we submit everywhere” (Bataille 2006 [1994], p. 82).

I therefore proceed with the understanding that “the territory that was opened in the twenties and thirties [by surrealism] remains with us today...[an] unfinished project” (Bryson 2000, p. 15) with threads that can be picked up for further exploration. Just as the daily “humiliations” of everyday life have not yet been

eradicated, neither have jarring juxtaposition, disconcerting objects, black humour, or the unconscious been exhausted as tools in service of the liberation of the imagination.

Federico Garcia Lorca, Pablo Neruda, or Hart Crane are not surrealist poets in precisely the same way as Paul Eluard, yet there are important affinities in both theory and technique which can be appropriately described as part of surrealist expression. Without the appeal to inner violence and disorder, the invocation of dreams, visions, and hallucinations, the transformation of language, the rejection of logical structure and linear metaphor, the poetry of all of these writers would be far different from what it is. In its antecedents as in its consequences, surrealism is too anarchic and individualistic to be reduced to a formula. It is best described in the broadest possible sense as a current of poetic expression inhering finally not so much in doctrines and personal relationships as in works. (Block 1959, p. 176)

By describing my novel as manifesting a surrealist mode of writing, I suggest that my method is to create a world in which the real and the imaginary become as indistinguishable at the margins as security and terror, and in which everything is directed with a certain degree of black humour and paranoia towards multiplying uncertainties regarding the nature of personal and political reality. This description again implies that a surrealist literary mode is more than a set of techniques, but also includes a certain spirit shared with surrealism, a spirit that tries to capture “the desired unity of poetry, love and revolt” (Vaneigem 1999 [1977], p. 50).

A surrealist writing mode might be presumed to have arisen in deliberate contrast to literary realism, widely understood to be marked by its faithful (or “realistic”) representation of authentic human experience, legitimate cause and effect relationships, the absence of magical or sensational episodes, and so forth (e.g., Watt 1957 ; Mulhall 2012 ; Campbell 2015). Modernism, of which surrealism

is one special case, is often specifically differentiated from realism as a matter of definition (e.g., Childs 2007).

Georg Lukács notably contrasted realism against modernism, characterising the latter as a movement that suffered from a self-absorbed inward focus, over-emphasised the isolated individual, and reduced social reality to an angst-ridden nightmare, in the process neglecting the temporal dynamism of social and historical perspective (e.g., Miles 1979 ; Lukács 2001 [1938]; Butler 2010). In this view, modernism privileged form over content, to the extent that “modernist novels are not about anything...but are merely a play upon forms or ideas” (Graham 1998, p. 207). For Lukács, it was realism, and in particular socialist realism, that could best enlighten readers about the human condition with all of its socio-historical determinants.

However, realism’s purchase on the real is not uncontested. Willard Bohn (1977) has pointed out that the prefix *sur* in surrealism, in Breton’s conception, serves as an extender, “increasing the extrinsic area to which the concept of reality applies” giving the word “a basically ontological focus” (page 205). Just as it is possible to interpret the surreal not as something other than real, but as a broader-than-usual conception of the real, a surrealist writing mode can be seen not as opposing but as extending literary realism. This perhaps-counterintuitive assertion is dependent first of all upon how one interprets realism in the first place.

Realism is itself an ambiguous term existing in tension between the descriptive and the prescriptive. Like surrealism, it may refer to a particular historical movement (in realism’s case, the nineteenth century) or to a general and persistent artistic mode (e.g., Baldick 2008); it sometimes refers to a particularly American style of writing (e.g., Forster 2016); sometimes European (e.g., Swales

1988); it sometimes comes with teleological imperatives, as with Lukács' socialist realism. What satisfies its requirement for authenticity depends greatly on contingencies such as time, place, culture, and knowledge. Its conventions can be exploited to the point of narrative collapse as in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (2009 [1759]); its contrivances and neat endings can be far from realistic. In short, what realism is generally taken to mean – a close approximation of the real world as actually experienced – is a contentious and malleable area whose boundaries are precisely what a surrealist mode is intended to contest and explore. Jonathan Lethem has noted the necessarily inclusive nature of realism:

“Realism” in art must by definition include the unreal, because the real includes it. The unreal being a grotesque category including language, ideology, dreamlife, power, irrational tribal impulses, daydreams, and everything else irrational and intangible which nevertheless has us in its grip. (Lethem 2012b, p. 4)

Lethem's terminology recalls Bakhtin's (1984 [1965]) “grotesque realism”, defined as an aspect of the carnivalesque, deriving its realism from a “lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract...to the material level” in which “cosmic, social, and bodily elements” combine “as an indivisible whole” that is “gay and gracious” (p. 19). The contribution of grotesque realism to human development, according to Bakhtin, is that it “escape[s] the false ‘truth of this world’ ...[and] liberates man from...the prevailing concept of the world...It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities” (p. 49). These are words and aims that would be quite at home in André Breton's manifestoes, as Bakhtin perhaps acknowledges implicitly in noting that “the grotesque became the prevailing form of various modernist movements” (p. 51). So it is in this sense that a surrealist literary mode can be subsumed under the rubric of realism, however grotesque, rather than standing wholly outside of it.

Having made the foregoing point, however, it remains useful to acknowledge and distinguish between “ordinary” realism – what could perhaps be described as the contingent realism of a culture’s shared assumptions about consensual everyday reality – and the also-real carnivalesque unmasking of that realism as a “false truth” from which we can be liberated. In my later discussion of the terrorism novel, I will make this very distinction between novels with a “realist” approach and those in a surrealist mode, with the understanding that both have their place and both have a relationship with reality. Each author, after all, must be free to choose his or her own battles.

Questions have also been raised during this project about the border between a surrealist mode and certain traditions within science fiction, and in particular about their respective considerations of paranoia. This confluence of ideas is a research topic that could easily merit a thesis of its own. Science fiction and surrealism are both such vast fields that “even their intersection is a rabbit hole” (Tondro 2016)<sup>4</sup>, and science fiction is well outside the scope of this project and my own expertise. The present discussion will therefore necessarily be limited to a few tentative observations.

Both approaches contest the boundaries of the real and the imagined, or the mimetic and the fantastic, with the questioning of reality concomitant with a degree of paranoia. Carl Freedman argues that there is “a generally privileged relationship between SF and paranoid ideology” based not only in its “estranging assumptions” (Freedman 1984, p. 15) but related, as is surrealism’s interest in the subject, to Jacques Lacan’s casting of paranoia as “paradigmatic of ‘normal’ human psychic development” (ibid.). Freedman posits the work of Philip K. Dick as emblematic of

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<sup>4</sup> Tondro also includes comics as another element in his intersectional “rabbit hole”.

this strain of science fiction, with a commodity-conspiracy nexus at its heart that also resonates sympathetically with the surrealist project.

Furthermore, science fiction can be hallucinatory and dreamlike, and can involve jarring juxtapositions and a collage style that may echo a surrealist aesthetic. Indeed some of the authors I shall reference in discussions below employ elements of science fiction in their work, including Robert M. Coates (the “x-ray bullet” in *The Eater of Darkness* (1959 [1926])), Jonathan Lethem (the interdimensional portal in *As She Climbed Across the Table* (1998)), and Boris Vian (the sexual clone-droids in *To Hell with the Ugly* (2011 [1948])).

It is also noteworthy that postmodern concerns about simulacra have implicated both science fiction and surrealist notions of reality. Quoting Baudrillard on the absorption of pleasure into hyperreality by digital simulation, Scott Bukatman postulates the emergence of a “techno-surrealism” in which libido transcends individual psyche, and asserts that this is “what [Fredric] Jameson must mean by ‘surrealism without the unconscious’” (Bukatman 1993, p. 20).

Researchers on the overlap between science fiction and surrealism have noted the paucity of scholarship on the issue (Ketterer 1976 ; Bozzetto and Evans 1997 ; Parkinson 2010 ; Parkinson 2015 ; Evans 2016), which, as interesting as the field is, may suggest the limits of the overlap itself. Arthur B. Evans has observed that the affinity between science fiction and surrealism is largely “one-directional”, i.e., that while the creators of science fiction “probably felt themselves to be the spiritual brothers of André Breton and his coterie, the latter dismissed their work as ‘inconsequential’” (2016, p. 353).

David Ketterer argues that the historical development of science fiction might usefully be explained “in terms of its annexing vitalizing aspects of



[surrealism] and other apocalyptic, or potentially apocalyptic, genres and modes” (1998, p. 397), and that the emergence of J.G. Ballard represents the moment when “the entire [science fiction] genre was revitalized by drawing significantly on the apocalyptic energies of surrealism” (ibid.).

A few considerations suggest, however, that the connection between the two fields is ultimately tenuous, and particularly so in the context of this research project. For one thing, science fiction is a genre, however porous its borders, whereas I am describing a surrealist *mode*, which, like satire, can inhabit any genre, as argued earlier in this chapter. It is perfectly possible to have science fiction in a surrealist mode – the aforementioned Ballard’s work is an oft-cited example of surrealist science fiction (e.g., Baxter 2008 ; Campbell 2008 ; Parkinson 2016); H.P. Lovecraft has been similarly cited (Parkinson 2015); Philip K. Dick, as noted above, is invoked for his recurring thematic treatment of the “mutable character” of reality (Robertson 2013, p. 501); some of Jules Verne’s work has been cast as a kind of amalgamation of surrealism and science fiction that predated the surrealist movement (Ketterer 1998); and Serge Brussolo has been described as a science fiction writer who moves “below the surface of a dreamlike universe” like a “surrealist diver” (Bozzetto and Evans 1997, p. 435).

Aside from the missed distinction between mode and genre, some scholars trying to make this connection make the mistake, as Pawel Frelik notes, of overusing “‘surreal’ as a general adjective to describe strangeness” in science fiction (Venezia 2011, p. 380). Even in the literature intended to fill the gaps in the “largely unexplored” (Bozzetto and Evans 1997, p. 437) area of science fiction-surrealist commonalities, authors frequently acknowledge the difficulty of the task. Gavin Parkinson, perhaps the leading scholar in this specialization, notes Robert

Benayoun's 1950s commentary in *Médium: communication surréaliste* focused on "the shortcomings of science fiction for the Surrealist project" (2015, p. 99) and that "[t]he Surrealist fantastic in poetry and art is different...from the guesswork about the future that characterises much SF" (ibid. p. 5).

Perhaps the most important distinction is that science fiction does not purport to describe present, already-existing reality, except maybe allegorically; its one indispensable signature element is surely the employment of science and/or technology that does not currently exist. By contrast, the surrealists were essentially arguing for an extended view of what reality actually comprises in the here-and-now, as noted above with regard to realism. That is the view that is playfully embraced in a surrealist mode of writing, or so I am arguing, i.e., that what we so often take to be ordinary reality is an etiolated version distorted by a range of perceptual factors, as discussed in the previous chapter.

It is undoubtedly true that there are cases where science fiction in a surrealist mode makes the lines difficult (or pointless) to draw, particularly when multiple signature elements are shared, e.g. dreaminess and paranoia. Whether such works are more science fiction or more surreal will likely depend on a reader's interpretation of which elements predominate. It could conceivably be argued that *Single Cabbage*'s various psycho-spatial contexts – Arbop's high-security urban world; the world within and underneath his tiny city of wooden blocks; and the world where Kennedy remains president – are quasi sci-fi alternative dimensions. However, in science fiction, different dimensions and the means of travelling between them would by convention be accompanied by some rational, scientific (or pseudo-scientific) explanation. In *Single Cabbage*, by contrast, no explanation is forthcoming, so that these worlds are left existing somewhere in an indefinite, non-

rational fusion of internal and external, a territory between dream and metaphor.

Thus I hold that, in the present case, the distinction is clear.

I have suggested that dreams, black humour, anti-fascism, crime (terrorism), and paranoia can be seen as five signature elements of both surrealism and my project. While each element has both technical and ethical aspects, I will in the present chapter analyse the use of dreams and black humour as primarily technical devices, and consider the other facets in the next chapter as predominantly reflecting the ethos of a surrealist mode.

## 2.1 Dreams

Dreams, dreams, dreams, with each step the domain of dreams expands...Dreams, dreams, dreams, nothing but dreams where the wind wanders and barking dogs are out on the roads.

– Louis Aragon, *A Wave of Dreams* (2010 [1924], p. 31)

### 2.1.1 Dreams and Surrealism

Dreams and the unconscious are foundational elements of surrealism and are, as such, a central preoccupation of the first *Surrealist Manifesto* (Breton 2010a [1924]). In it, André Breton defines “surreality” as “a kind of absolute reality” resulting from the resolution of the two apparently contradictory states of dreams and reality (p. 14), and questions “why should I not grant to dreams what I occasionally refuse reality, that is, this value of certainty in itself” (p. 12). Under this heading of “dreams,” therefore, I include not only the stories we tell ourselves while we are asleep, but all the ways our sense of *certainty* about reality – the stories we tell ourselves while we are awake – is subject to the unconscious perceptual and interpretive forces to which I referred in the previous chapter. It is one of the ambitions of *Single Cabbage* to posit a waking world that bears more than a passing resemblance to dreams.

What differentiates Kant, Nietzsche and Freud from the tiresome cliché that ‘life is but a dream’ is the sense that the confabulations we live are consensual. The idea that the world we experience is a solipsistic delusion projected from the interior of our mind consoles rather than disturbs us, since it conforms with our infantile fantasies of omnipotence; but the thought that our so-called interiority owes its existence to a fictionalized consensus will always carry an uncanny charge. (Fisher 2009, p. 56)

The surrealist movement, for its part, overtly opposed the world of the unconscious and irrational to that of the conscious and rational, but it also suggested that what we take to be external is substantially contingent upon and subject to our inner lives – that the inner and the outer constitute a feedback loop. Leonora Carrington, for example, in *Down Below*, in relating her descent into madness as a surrealist aesthetic, described how “she and the world mirrored each other” (Hertz 2010, p. 99). Walter Benjamin credits surrealism in linking “the realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up” with a dialectical process of historical awakening (Benjamin 1999, p. 13).

When Georges Bataille, “the black surrealist of catastrophe,” (Bataille 2006 [1994], p. 6) wrote that he “cannot consider someone free if they do not have the desire to sever the bonds of language within themselves” (ibid., p. 49) he was making a connection between the grip of a constructed and incomplete reality and the liberating power of dreams and the unconscious. Here Bataille, simultaneously a sort of renegade surrealist and a strong critic of the movement, was in the midst of a passage that recognises that “automatic writing was more than a petty provocation” because André Breton’s surrealism, like poststructuralism after it, understood the sense in which reality is contingent upon language. Bataille continues:

Insubordination, if not extended to the domain of images and words, is still no more than a refusal of external forms (such as the government or the police) when ordered words and images are entrusted *to us* by a system which, one thing leading to another, causes the entirety of nature to be submitted to utility. Belief -- or,

rather, *servitude* to the real world -- is, without the shadow of a doubt, fundamental to all servitude. (Bataille 2006 [1994], p. 49)

The imperative to reject servitude to “the real world” is already at the heart of surrealism in the form of giving the freest possible rein to the poetry of dreams. The surrealist movement associated the power of the unconscious, as via automatic writing, with the compulsion to free ourselves from bonds that may not be readily apparent.

### 2.1.2 Dreams in a Surrealist Literary Mode

As noted in the synopsis, *Single Cabbage* is written in such a way as to exclude the possibility of definitively separating dream from real. I have tried to achieve this disconcerting effect by rendering different parts of Arbop’s psychological existence as different physical spaces. Within his tiny toy city is a habitable place wrought largely from a tangle of Arbop’s memories and fears, a dreamlike space that nevertheless has seemingly tangible effects in his daily real life. Existing in some sense above his ordinary life is a space in which a besieged but unassassinated Kennedy persists, as if rendered from a grotesque admixture of Arbop’s innocence and his paranoia. Elements of Kennedy’s world, too, leach into Arbop’s ordinary existence.

The plot of *Single Cabbage* was arrived at by a process somewhat analogous to Breton’s automatic writing, by turning off, insofar as possible, the internal editors of logic and reason and trying to summon an intuitive association of events. Arbop’s frequent forays into various tunnels, for example, arose out of an inspiration that felt driven more by instinct than a rational decision-making process. However, unlike in automatic writing, which explicitly forbade any concern for revision or literary quality, I have in the editing process endeavoured to maintain an internally consistent logic that hopes to build tension and engage readers without losing its

essentially dreamlike quality. I propose that dreaminess is the single most essential element of a surrealist mode, but it can be administered in different ways and in different dosages.

*Magnetic Fields (Les Champs Magnétiques)* (Breton and Soupault 1985 [1920]) was a collaborative effort between André Breton and Philippe Soupault, written several years before the *Surrealist Manifesto* (Breton 2010a [1924]). It is one of the earliest<sup>5</sup> and purest examples of a work systematically employing the original surrealist ideal of automatic writing. “The discipline involved in automatic writing is that of vigilantly resisting the temptation to interrupt the stream of consciousness, or rather of the theoretically subjacent consciousness, or to interfere with or in any way alter post facto the results obtained ‘with laudable disdain as regards their literary quality’” (Breton and Soupault 1985 [1920], from the introduction by surrealist David Gascoyne, p. 15). The art of writing automatically is enabled by maintaining a speed of writing that precludes overthinking.

If we were interested in establishing a surrealist purity test, *Magnetic Fields* – not quite a novel, since it comprises a loose amalgamation of prose, poetry, and epigrams – would be a good candidate for the gold standard. It is entertaining, deliriously poetic, and practically unreadable – at least, for more than a page or so at a time:

We were shown around cheap dream manufactories and shops full of obscure dramas. It was a splendid cinema in which the roles were played by our old friends. We lost sight of them and we went to find them again always in the same place. They gave us rotten dainties

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<sup>5</sup> There are even earlier examples of automatic writing, e.g., by Hélène Smith, also known as Catherine-Elise Müller, a spiritualist much admired by the Surrealists who produced or channelled, inter alia, purported examples of writing from the planets Uranus and Mars in the 1890s (Rosemont 1998); and by Pearl Curran, who, through her Ouija board, beginning in 1912 channelled what she claimed was a spirit being known as Patience Worth, with whom she collaborated on several novels (Cory 1919). In these cases, the automatic writing was ostensibly the work of external forces operating through the writer, rather than a revelation of the unconscious forces within, but this conceit does not exclude an interpretation or indeed a creative intention as art (rather than, or in addition to, being a hoax or a joke).

and we told them about our plans for future happiness. They fixed their eyes on us, they spoke: can one really remember those base words, their sleep-sick lays? (Breton and Soupault 1985 [1920], p. 26)

On it continues, a stream of images, notions, questions, impressions, assertions, untroubled by narrative as commonly understood as an account of connected events. Like Breton's *Soluble Fish* (Breton 2010b [1924]), written in a similarly near-automatic fashion, it is often lovely and evocative but neither requires nor rewards starting at the beginning and continuing through to the end, and, I would argue, is best enjoyed in short fragments selected at random by letting one's riffling thumb choose the page. In anything other than constrained amounts strategically employed, automatic writing is primarily of interest as a writing exercise or an aid to therapy, as its disdain for literary quality admits. However, there can be no doubt that it can produce the kinds of surprising juxtapositions and poetic associations that serve so well to enliven a text.

I would also note something else: that "really existing" automatic writing, if indeed *Magnetic Fields* is our book-length exemplar, falls far short of a true unfiltered outpouring of the raw unconscious. It comprises not only language in the form of actual words, but grammatically correct sentences, many of which reflect a degree of interpretation of observations. Furthermore, the book combines the efforts of two writers and is divided into sections, complete with titles. Obviously, none of this would be possible without a degree of conscious intervention. Once we open the door to a combined effort of the unconscious and the conscious, we allow for variability in the balance, amounting to a range of intensity of the application of the technique, from a light dose of abstract free association to the fearlessly unintelligible.

Automatic writing on its own may not be the best way to produce a long, engaging page-turner, but it offers a useful solution to some of the mundane problems of writing something that transcends generic use of language. I feel that I use a measure of it in *Single Cabbage* when I am reaching for an unusual effect, such as in Oliver Arbop's letters to his brother ("a thousand tight-fisted optic lobes of pure pudding and an irritatingly stationary machine, outside roaring", p. 67), which also incorporate randomly chosen and poetically combined snatches of text by numerous other writers, including Nellie Bly, Jean Lyotard, Raymond Queneau, Guillaume Apollinaire, Charles Baudelaire, Walter Abish, and John F. Kennedy.

In addition, whenever I realise that I am about to use a trite phrase, I try to employ something akin to automatic writing as a corrective. I try to reject my internal library of stock phrases in favour of an attentive calming of the mind to allow a surprising association to occur. Sometimes such a process can result in a description that seems apt in a not-quite-rational way: the keratin faces of the mysterious toe-like men who are occasionally glimpsed in Arbop's tiny block city (p. 28). This approach, it seems to me, draws from the same unconscious resources as fully fledged automatic writing, but is more tightly focused.

It is not rare to encounter fictional worlds that blend the real and the dream-like and seem to draw upon unconscious associations. *The Third Policeman*, by Flann O'Brien, is full of playful, expectation-defying phrases that would be right at home in the midst of *Magnetic Fields*: "My brain was like an ivy near where swallows fly. Thoughts were darting around me like a sky that was loud and dark with birds but none came into me or near enough." (O'Brien 1974 [1967], p. 124)

This kind of automatic, unconscious, or supra-rational writing is only one of the ways that a surrealist mode can do its work of challenging our expectations. *The*



*Third Policeman* provides other good examples of ways to explore the liminality between the imagined and the palpable. O'Brien frequently creates a hallucinatory effect that promotes the uncertainty, terror, and exhilaration that come with the edges of the familiar giving way to unmapped territory. To wit: "I clambered through the opening and found myself, not at once in a room, but crawling along the deepest window-ledge I have ever seen. When I reached the floor and jumped noisily down upon it, the open window seemed very far away and much too small to have admitted me." (O'Brien 1974 [1967], p. 20)

That this literary approach is intended to challenge ordinary conceptions of reality is confirmed by occasional explicit invocations elsewhere in O'Brien's text:

"The scene was real and incontrovertible, and at variance with the talk of the Sergeant, but I knew that the Sergeant was talking the truth and if it was a question of taking my choice, it was possible that I would have to forego the reality of all the simple things my eyes were looking at." (p. 75)

Or:

"His face was completely hidden in the dark and nothing was clear to me except his overbearing policemen'ship, his massive rearing of wide strengthly flesh, his domination and his unimpeachable reality." (p. 156)

If *The Third Policeman* were simply a ghost story or fantasy, I would not characterise it as exhibiting a surrealist mode. I propose that depictions of separate otherworldly realities lacking implications for our own do not come under the surrealist mode rubric, no matter how dreamlike they might be. In *The Third Policeman*, however, the extraordinary bleeds into the ordinary. This is a story in which a man's mentality, poisoned by his own horrific action, actively deforms reality against his best efforts to normalize everything. The external world and his

guilty mind become indistinguishable. *The Third Policeman* leaves us in the end with an uneasy sense that reality seems suddenly more fungible and capricious than it did before, and that our private thoughts might have public effects. Instead of a world of routines, habits, and pavements, there is mystery, possibility, and unpredictability.

In *Froth on the Daydream* (*L'Ecume des Jours*) (Vian 1996 [1947]), Boris Vian creates a different sort of world that is similarly dreamlike and irrational, with an abundance of absurdities. The protagonist is Colin, a carefree and wealthy young man who quickly falls in love and gets married, only to have everything fall apart little by little in fragments. Hardly a page goes by without something happening that defies reality, from minor details to major plot events. We learn within the first few pages that Colin empties his bath every day by boring a hole in the bottom of his tub. It normally drains out into the study of the tenant who lives in the flat below his, but, the author notes, one day the position of the study changes so that the water flows instead directly into the larder (p. 9-10).

Our sense of place and of physical laws is immediately compromised, and soon the reader becomes accustomed to the dream logic. An eel persistently arrives through the cold-water tap to steal pineapple toothpaste. There exists a “pianocktail,” part piano, part cocktail dispenser, which makes drinks that taste like whatever music is played. Sausages writhe and emit death-rattles on the plate. The setting seems to be Paris but the money is not francs, it’s “doublezoons.” On an ice-skating outing, Colin and his friends must negotiate a rink that “gyrates” and causes frequent deaths by various unlikely means. A sort of vortex draws “ninety percent” of the skaters into a pile where most of them are crushed and then swept away by “serf-sweepers” whose job it is to remove the dead. A speeding skater passes

through Colin's legs, the resulting force of air sending Colin several yards into the air before he lands in time to see the speeder crash into the rink wall and get flattened "like a marshmallow jelly-fish picked to pieces by a destructive child" (p. 24). The serf-sweepers remove the body and perform a small ceremony. "Then everything went back to normal. And Chick, Lisa and Colin went round and round and round" (ibid.).

Life in *Froth on the Daydream* is unpredictable and unfolds very much like dreams, with the unlikely and impossible anomalies breaching the reality without troubling us, any disturbance somehow smoothed out of the way by a combination of processes: forgetting an event, forgetting that we've forgotten, accepting what remains, and moving on. The effect enables an oblique form of critique that manages to make political points without being overbearing. When the serf-sweepers remove the flattened body of the speeding skater, they plant "a cross of ice" on the place where he died, which melts to the accompaniment of "a selection of religious records" played by the skating rink's master of ceremonies. When Colin needs to get a job because he's dried up his fortune buying flowers for the stricken Chloe, he finds one in an armaments factory that rapidly ages its employees. The manager, age twenty-nine, has after one year of work in the factory become elderly, passing "a shaking wrinkled hand across the lines of his face." (p. 179) They make rifle barrels and they have discovered that "to grow straight, undistorted rifle barrels we came to the conclusion, some time ago, that we needed human warmth. It's true, anyway, for every kind of arms." (p. 180). The process involves making holes in the earth, stripping one's clothes off, and lying on the spot covered in a sterilized blanket doing one's best "to give out a perfectly regular heat" (p. 181). The rifle

barrels grow downwards, into the earth: the warmer the human, the straighter the barrel.

There are other ways of invoking the unconscious, or undoing the rational, within a surrealist mode than by the extravagances of O'Brien's or Vian's method. Jonathan Lethem, for example, manages to undo reality with more straightforward and largely realist prose. Lethem tends to incorporate the outlandish in such a way as to make it seem normal (making familiar the strange), whether it's an invisibility ring in *Fortress of Solitude* (Lethem 2003) or a nullity that serves as a highly discriminating interdimensional portal in *As She Climbed Across the Table* (Lethem 1998).

*Chronic City* (Lethem 2010) is spilling over with elements that are overtly and comically preposterous without sacrificing our sense of a plausible Manhattan: the unearthly fog in the financial district or the ubiquitous chocolate smell that some perceive as a sound; hypnotic objects called "chaldrons" that elicit every form of exigent longing and are only available through auctions that can never be won; the communal sadness over the famous girlfriend stuck in space, whom the protagonist-boyfriend, despite his public grief, secretly cannot even remember; characters who live in the "air space" behind kitchens; the ostensible tiger that roams unseen destroying entire city blocks. A protagonist in such a city is virtually forced by sheer pragmatism to have a chary approach to his environment:

"I felt my interior map expand to allow for the reality of this place, the corridor floor's lumpy checkerboard mosaic, the cloying citrus of the superintendent's disinfectant oil, the bank of dented brass mailboxes, and the keening of a dog from behind an upstairs door, alerted to the buzzer and my

scuffling bootheels. I have trouble believing anything exists until I know it bodily.”  
(Lethem 2010, p. 9)

The juxtaposition of the preposterous and the mundane in *Chronic City* forces a similarly uneasy mapping of reality in the mind of the reader, who must sustain two realities simultaneously, one comfortably familiar, the other absurd, dangerous, and thrilling. On the one hand, we accept the latter by dismissing it, the same way we might filter out uncomfortable realities like homeless people rattling cups of change on the high street. At the same time, however, one feels just below the surface that the ordinary is hiding something, and that it is fragile. Tension arises from repeated breaches of the ordinary by the strange, and the subsequent attempts to ignore or repair the damage. What is striking is how much strangeness reality can accommodate, or how determined people are to pretend that things are normal.

A similar theme emerges in Lethem’s *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999). Protagonist Lionel Essrog becomes effectively invisible on public transport when he yields to his Tourette’s Syndrome and begins muttering and then shouting. The louder and more outrageous he is, the more invisible he becomes as his fellow passengers act as if he is not there with a stubbornness that rises in intensity in parallel with the Tourette’s.

I had the opportunity to speak via Skype with Lethem about realism and surrealism in August of 2015 and this subject of the rupturing of reality came up:

This has been one of my obsessive subjects, [the idea] that we’re editing and creating amnesiac narratives to survive all the time...Consensual reality is fragile like the skin of a bubble, it ruptures instantly but it also reseals...As I see it, realism as a method exclusive of the uncanny, the dream life, the irrational, the allegorical or symbolic, suggestions that things have hidden meanings as well as the overt meanings, and participate in hidden operations as well as in their overt or visible operations, it seems to me a realism that claims to define itself by excluding all that stuff is a very impoverished real indeed, because we all live in an experience of reality that does

engulf that stuff, and our experience is interpenetrated by it. (Lethem 2015)

It is from a similar perspective and for a similar purpose that I have tried to put *Single Cabbage* together from little else than constant breaches of ordinary reality by the unexpected and the unexplainable. I have not provided any explanations for the implausibilities, such as Arbop's being able to enter a micro-city made of small colourful wooden blocks, treating it as a reality when it cannot be, specifically for the jarring effect of that irrationality. Neither do I explain why or how Arbop is able to inhabit (and then vacate) a timeless world where Kennedy is always president, or what relation that world has to Arbop's "normal" world; or why it is that the presumed terrorist at work in Arbop's city has all the same shirts that Arbop has; or why events in the tiny block city are sometimes mirrored in the larger, real city.

While the absurd events in *Single Cabbage* are not meant to suggest that specific invisible parallels exist all around us in our real lives, they do imply generally that we can occasionally catch a glimpse of absurdities and implausibilities as breaches in what most of the time we accept as perfectly normal business-as-usual reality. In addition, they physicalize the unspoken poetry of our unconscious minds, in which, either awake or asleep, we might indeed regularly inhabit tiny worlds we create, or find a place for a perpetual Kennedy who has never quite faded away somewhere in our personal political imaginary. These kinds of things are, I believe, very much present in our daily lives, but reside inarticulately below the surface, only whispering just out of range of our conscious minds. I take it as one of my jobs in *Single Cabbage* to draw back the curtain and invite these whispers to join the conversation openly.

Sometimes the dreamlike aspects of a work are not immediately signalled but are allowed to emerge slowly over time. In *The Hearing Trumpet*, Leonora Carrington begins with an eminently realist account of Marian Leatherby, an elderly woman whose relatives are plotting to have her moved from the family home to an institutional residence facility. The title refers to the ornate device, which Marian receives as a gift, that opens her senses to the perfidy by which she is surrounded. Carrington, one of several women who became attached to the Surrealist movement (and to Max Ernst) in the 1930s (Hopkins 2004, p. 124), unravels her realist world slowly but, in the end, completely. What begins as a charming but ordinary tale of an eccentric woman fighting for dignity and control over her life ends with the earth literally tilted on its axis, the protagonist and her fellow institutionalised comrades led to their destinies by a werewoman and a poet on an “atom-driven ark” after discarding their previous identities by means of being boiled in a pot of soup – inflicted upon them by their future selves, an event they experience sequentially from both perspectives. In short things start out normal and get crazy, yet remain anchored to the sombre by what is serious at the heart of the novel: senility and abandonment.

At first, what seems to make a case for surreality might seem better explained as an invocation of dementia: “I am not really here in England in this scented garden although it does not disappear as it nearly always does, I am inventing all this and it is about to disappear, but it does not.” (Carrington 2005 [1974], p. 15) By the end, with all traces of the “real” world left behind, ostensible senility might seem better explained as life in a surrealist mode: “Anubeth growled and reached up to get a very strange animal from the ceiling for my inspection. It was a tortoise with a baby’s wizened face and long thin legs which were frozen in a

gallop.” (Carrington 2005 [1974], p. 152) The allure of Carrington’s novel is largely in the difficulty of telling the subjective from the objective, which works whether we interpret it as a commentary on senility or on reality. As previously noted, this ambiguity between inner life and external reality is a primary theme of *Single Cabbage*. The answer is not hidden; there is no answer. I write it so that the narrative is ambiguous even to me. Not only the possibility, but the inevitability, of simultaneous multiple interpretations is one of my main artistic goals.

Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* represents yet another way into a reality-twisting mind-set that I think, in its insistent befogging of the real, demonstrates an affinity with the surrealist interest in dreams. The novel tells the story of Oedipa Maas’s investigation into Trystero, which she gets pulled into as a result of inexplicably being named executor of an old flame’s will. Trystero is an equivocal term referring either to a man or a movement or possibly just a zeitgeist, involving an underground postal system and some obscure symbology. The title refers to the auctioning off (“crying”) of a collection of valuable forged stamps. The fake stamps are rarer and more valuable than the real ones they closely resemble, the only difference being the simulacra’s inclusion of Trystero symbols or other images serving to undermine the official postal service. It becomes impossible to tell whether Trystero is real, or Oedipa’s imagination, or possibly even a very elaborate practical joke played by Pierce Inverarity, the old flame. Pynchon is stubbornly uninterested in resolving any of the mysteries; interpreting the narrative is like a Rorschach test. It becomes impossible to say whether we are privy to a character chasing an obscure truth or fleeing from reality, and it is precisely that uncertainty that provides the frisson to the drama. There are plenty of absurdities but no overtly



fantastic elements as there are in, say, a Lethem novel. Nevertheless, our sense of reality increasingly fades, the ice under our feet becoming ever thinner.

Pynchon makes a lengthy tangent of a play within his play, “The Courier’s Tragedy,” a Jacobean revenge play full of intrigues. Its devolution into uncertainty mirrors not only the main plot of the novel, but the tabooing process of the big Other:

It is about this point in the play, in fact, that things really get peculiar, and a gentle chill, an ambiguity, begins to creep in among the words. Heretofore the naming of names has gone on either literally or as metaphor. But now, as the Duke gives his fatal command, a new mode of expression takes over. It can only be called a kind of ritual reluctance. Certain things, it is made clear, will not be spoken aloud; certain events will not be shown onstage; though it is difficult to imagine, given the excesses of the preceding acts, what these things could possibly be. (Pynchon 2000 [1965], p. 51)

Oedipa Maas’s attempt to unravel a mystery around a centuries-old secret alternative postal delivery society takes her deep into “an underground of the unbalanced” (p. 66) where a trail of what seem to be real clues dissolves into a multiplication of uncertainties. Whereas a stereotypical conspiracy theorist might live in attenuating hope for a remorseful plotter’s deathbed confession, Pynchon’s hero might well be the victim of a deathbed practical joke. “Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back...She glanced down the corridor of Cohen’s rooms in the rain and saw, for the very first time, how far it might be possible to get lost in this.” (p. 71)

The images in *The Crying of Lot 49* are relentlessly disquieting, keeping us on the defensive and unsure of our ground: “a nightmare about something in the mirror” (p. 76); “the most beloved of folklores...brought into doubt, cataclysmic of dissents voiced, suicidal of commitments chosen” (p. 78); constant wondering whether her suspicions all amounted to nothing more than “a little something for her shrink to fix” (p. 82); “trouble sorting the night into real and dreamed” (p. 88); “Oedipa, to retaliate [against diffident children warming their hands near an imaginary fire], stopped believing in them” (p. 90). The novel’s dreamlike reality is consistent with the concept of a surrealist mode. Pynchon neither solves his mysteries nor allows us the comfort of attributing the cognitive dissonance to madness with full confidence. There is always the implication that the clues might point to something real just beyond our apprehension – like pursuit in a dream.

In *Single Cabbage* I try to render a similarly elusive reality by charging Arbop with the task of following trails of indefinite evidence regarding inconclusive events. The clues lead only to multiplicities of interpretation, in which terrorism, national security, history, fear, and unconscious assumptions all implicate each other.

It is worth restating that the undermining of reality via the various techniques collected here under the rubric of dreams is closely related to paranoia, which will be considered separately below. These two signature elements of surrealism essentially overlap in the concept of madness, which deserves brief discussion here as an aspect of dreams. In most of the novels I’ve mentioned, the nightmare of madness is omnipresent as the negative potentiality of the dreamlike worlds depicted. The threat is explicit, and the novels often include a specific trigger for it. In *Chronic City* it is the hypnotic “chaldron” that induces a hunger that cannot be

satisfied; in *The Crying of Lot 49* it is a face that can be made by Dr Hilarius, which “has an effective radius of a hundred yards and drives anyone unlucky enough to see it down forever into the darkened oubliette among the terrible shapes, and secures the hatch irrevocably above them” (p. 103); in *The Third Policeman* it is a paint of an unknown colour that cannot be seen without insanity as the result; in *The Hearing Trumpet* it is what lives in the tower, that ego-nullifying, rationality-defying vision of one’s future self, boiling one’s present self in a hot pot of soup. Each novel has a point that represents, if not a portal to madness, then a launch pad out of the ordinary real past the point of no return.

The relevance of the element of madness to the element of dreams in a surrealist mode is that our acknowledgement of the porousness of the borders between our dreaming and waking lives suggests analogous uncertainties between sane and insane. Whether we lose our confidence in reality completely or cling to our illusions too tightly, sanity itself becomes contested territory. Sanity, like reality, is fungible and subject to internal and external interpretations. “From the moment I entered the insane ward on the Island,” wrote Nellie Bly of infiltrating an asylum for journalistic purposes, “I made no attempt to keep up the assumed *role* of insanity. I talked and acted just as I do in ordinary life. Yet strange to say, the more sanely I talked and acted the crazier I was thought to be.” (Bly 2011 [1887], p. 7) By nearly a century later, the state of the art had not improved. In the early 1970s, when psychologist David Rosenhan conducted an experiment by getting sane “pseudopatients” admitted to psychiatric hospitals, he found that “[h]owever much we may be personally convinced that we can tell the normal from the abnormal, the evidence is simply not compelling...the normal are not detectably sane” (Rosenhan 1973, p. 250).

For a surrealist mode of writing, the blurriest margins of these territories – real and unreal, conscious and unconscious, sane and insane – are where things are most interesting, where the stakes are highest, and where we can most fruitfully query the reliability of our most trusted assumptions in an effort to liberate our imaginations.

## 2.2 Black Humour

“Whenever he makes a joke, there is always a problem hidden inside.”

--Goethe, speaking about Georg Lichtenberg, as quoted by André Breton in the *Anthology of Black Humour* (Breton 2009 [1997], p. 60)

“What a way to start the week!”

--Condemned man being led to the gallows on a Monday, in Freud’s example of humour in service of the ego, as related by André Breton in the *Anthology of Black Humour* (Breton 2009 [1997], p. 24)

### 2.2.1 Black Humour and Surrealism

The best argument for black humour being a signature element of surrealism, apart from its self-evidence in surrealist works, is probably André Breton’s decision to publish an *Anthology of Black Humour* (2009 [1997]) as part of his canon. Breton does not offer a precise definition of black humour in the *Anthology*. The closest he comes is to say that black humour “is the mortal enemy of sentimentality...and of a certain short-lived whimsy” (p. 25) and to note that “Mexico...with its splendid funeral toys, stands as the chosen land of black humour” (p. 23). Speaking of humour generally, Breton quotes (with reservations) Louis Aragon’s appropriately surreal but strictly “external” definition: “Humour is what soup, chickens and symphony orchestras lack” (p. 22). Breton himself prefers a more inward-focused view of humour as “a superior revolt of the mind” (p. 22).

In his introduction to Jonathan Swift’s entry in the anthology, Breton identifies Swift as the “true initiator” of black humour, as “a man who...was

constantly outraged [and who]... ‘provokes laughter, but does not share in it’” (Breton 2009 [1997], p. 29). Breton argues that Swift was able to “externalize the sublime” and thereby “transcend the merely comic” (Breton 2009 [1997], p. 30). The modifier “black” implies a dark counterbalance to any levity, and black humour can contain so much bitterness or horror that it “need not be ‘funny,’ in the usual sense of the word” (Rosemont 1989b, p. 84), even when it provokes laughter. Black humour, for Breton, is “a complicated combination of Hegel’s poetic ‘objective humour’ [*Objektiverhumor*] and Freud’s ironic ‘gallows humour’ [*Galgenhumor*]” (Haynes 2006, p. 25). The Freudian aspect may reflect black humour’s use as a tool of psychological liberation, but in its Hegelian aspect it performs a “dialectical turn [and] becomes the articulation of a kind of ‘social unconscious’” (Haynes 2006, p. 26). It is “a discursive weapon to contest symbolically the dominant discourse of society” (Erickson 1988, p. 199). In other words, it is one of the ways in which surrealism disrupts the symbolic order of the big Other. Black humour reveals “foreign bodies” in our unconscious and exploits the tension between what the big Other knows and what we know but may not yet acknowledge.

The wider and deeper the breach between the official and the unofficial conscious, the more difficult it becomes for motives of inner speech to turn into outward speech...wherein they might acquire formulation, clarity and rigor. Motives under these conditions begin to fail, to lose their verbal countenance, and little by little really do turn into a ‘foreign body’ in the psyche (Haynes 2006, p. 37, quoting Vološinov on Freud within discussion of black humour).

The social and political nature of surrealism’s use of black humour and its relevance to the notion of the big Other derives from the realization that “black humour points up a foreignness not on the peripheries of social discourse but right at its ‘official’ centre” (Haynes 2006, p. 37). Breton’s thinking about surrealist black humour was strongly influenced by Jacques Vaché and his concept of “Umour” – a

“sensation...of the theatrical (and joyless) pointlessness of everything” (Ristić 2015 [1933], p. 200) – which, again, effectively had the big Other in its sights as the prime target. For Vaché, Umour was a strategy to be employed against the “debraining machine,” a concept borrowed from Alfred Jarry and representing official social discourse’s way of “depriving human beings of the ability to think and dream for themselves” (Rosemont 2008, p. 71).

Proulx, Heine *et al.* (2010) have argued that absurdist black humour, such as in Kafka’s parable *An Imperial Message* or the Monty Python treatment of *Biggles: Pioneer Air Fighter*, can create an “unfamiliar familiar” resulting in a sense of the uncanny that threatens and disturbs people’s “meaning frameworks.” As the authors note, absurdist humour, unlike standard jokes that resolve incongruities into a kind of sense, “does not culminate in a punch line that restores meaning” (p. 821), but instead multiplies the incongruities with a relentlessly destabilising effect. Thus this kind of humour serves the essential surrealist goal of provoking a *crise de conscience* (Breton 2010 [1930], p. 123) (sometimes translated as crisis of consciousness and sometimes as attack of conscience – I prefer to take it to mean both simultaneously). I certainly hope to destabilise with the humour in *Single Cabbage*.

Secondarily I would add the personal belief that humour in this vein is effective not only because of its inherent positive qualities, but because without it – particularly in a novel with a political dimension – the writing may suffer from a strident polemicism. One of the reasons to employ black humour in a novel that hopes to multiply political uncertainties – i.e., one of the reasons it is able to provoke a crisis – is that it is not subject to rational counter-argument or any of the other usual forms of intellectual resistance.

Attempts to achieve [a shift in consciousness] by “serious,” rational means invariably prove self-defeating. Rational argument affects only a very small number of people a very small part of the time...People who *consciously* respect the police, admire their employer, and revere the church fathers nonetheless will laugh heartily at film comedies, songs and comic strips that sadistically ridicule cops, bosses, and preachers. The “comic situation” allows the unconscious truth to erupt into consciousness in a spontaneously liberating way. (Rosemont 1989b, p. 83)

Humour – black, absurdist humour – is a key tactic within surrealism’s strategy. It’s not an argument, it makes no claims, and as such is irrefutable. It entertains and disturbs “meaning frameworks” by an illicit appeal to that which people can know and the big Other cannot.

### 2.2.2 Black Humour in a Surrealist Literary Mode

In each of the books I have selected as exhibiting elements of a surrealist mode, black humour is present. *The Third Policeman* veers dangerously far at times towards the silly end of the humour spectrum but it works because of the book’s black heart: the murder that serves as its inciting incident. The crime is described in the sort of horrific detail that ensures it can never be left behind by the reader. With something so grievous as ballast, O’Brien’s absurd humour is free to fly, and no matter how absurd it gets, it never becomes light. On the contrary, while it amuses the narrative becomes frightening, tethered, as it were, to a corpse. This is a disturbing and potent combination of forces. The horror would not be as solemn, nor the humour as exhilarating, did they not occur together in this juxtaposition. The combination of the comic and the horrific, not as poles in opposition but as the razor’s edge between, gives black humour its destabilizing power. By “capitalizing on the traumas of the external world...as an occasion for pleasure” (Erickson 1988, p. 208), black humour defeats our resistance to being disturbed.

As in *The Third Policeman*, the extravagant levity of *The Hearing Trumpet* successfully avoids flying away on its own ebullience by virtue of the sober reality at the heart of it. For O'Brien it was murder; for Carrington, it is the prospect of its protagonist's senility and her family's decision, having had enough of her, to put her conveniently out of sight. This is the sort of solemn narrative detail that tolls like a funeral bell throughout regardless of what else happens. Carrington is free to pursue her imagination's fancies wherever they lead without her story losing its heart. Some of the funniest and most absurd lines also contain the darkest sense of menace: "She nodded gravely and pointed into the soup with the long wooden spoon. 'Jump into the broth, meat is scarce this season.'" (Carrington 2005 [1974], p. 138) Or: "Audrey was found congealed upside-down in a small iceberg that invaded her bedroom. She was still holding an empty bottle of champagne to her lips." (p. 153)

A similar phenomenon occurs in Vian's *Froth on the Daydream*. On the one hand the book feels as whimsical and frothy as the title implies but, like *The Third Policeman* and *The Hearing Trumpet*, there is a seriousness at its centre, in this case a melancholy and a sense of futility. Protagonist Colin's love, Chloe, is afflicted with a water-lily on the lung and he gladly depletes his fortune to buy her the flowers that seem to help. A "remedy shop" is full of machines, one of which hides under its rusty tin cover "a composite animal, half-flesh, half-metal...killing itself swallowing the basic materials and expulsing them in the form of little round pills." (p. 121) Nor is he able to save Chloe, in the end. She dies, and her body "disappears." The household becomes so gloomy that a resident mouse decides to commit suicide by making an agreement with a reluctant cat: the mouse will put its head in the cat's mouth; the cat will stretch out its tail; as soon as someone steps on the tail, the cat will involuntarily decapitate the mouse. The mouse's head goes in



and they wait on the pavement, the cat's tail outstretched, awaiting the fatal step. Eleven little girls from an orphanage are heard getting nearer: "They were singing. And they were blind." (p. 221) This is how the novel ends, simultaneously hilarious and heart-breaking – a beautiful effect that is in large part enabled by the dream-like strategy of a surrealist literary mode.

*The Crying of Lot 49* is frequently funny, to my ear, and the blackness of its humour is readily apparent. A member of the National Automobile Dealer's Association (NADA) is plagued by terrible dreams of emptiness: "Just this creaking metal sign that said nada, nada, against the blue sky. I used to wake up hollering." (p. 111) An executive replaced by a machine, about to commit suicide, is mocked for his decisionmaking process by the efficiency expert who fired him: "'Nearly three weeks it takes him,' marvelled the efficiency expert, 'to decide. You know how long it would've taken the IBM 7094? Twelve microseconds. No wonder you were replaced.'" (p. 87)

In *El Señor Presidente* (Asturias 1980 [1946]), which I will mainly discuss in Chapter Two on anti-fascism, terrorism, and paranoia, Miguel Angel Asturias uses a particularly relentless and poetic form of writing that can be called black humour. It is of the type that provokes little laughter, so infused is it with violence and terror. Indeed the text is so unfunny that it initially seems odd to call it humour at all, regardless of how black. Yet outwardly it bears a resemblance to comedy, maintaining a certain carnivalesque sensibility somehow, as if the narrative had the form of a farce into which something horrific had been poured. Asturias's novel, which won him the 1967 Nobel Prize in Literature, has been variously described as "the first fully-fledged Surrealist novel in Latin America" (Martin 1989, p. 149), as

an early example of magic realism, and as a bridge between European surrealism and Latin American magic realism (ibid). It has a dreamlike quality throughout.

“I have been informed both by the cook in that house (who was spying on her master and the housemaid) and the housemaid (who was spying on her master and the cook), that Angel Face was shut in his room with General Canales for approximately three-quarters of an hour.” (p. 65)

“His laughter hardened in his mouth like the plaster dentists use for their models.” (p. 49)

The bitter observations and the startling imagery create a tone that is at once comic and unnerving, a powerful entry into the world of black humour via small absurd details, such as a terrified man suddenly shaken by hiccups, or a woman who needs two seats on the tram, one for each buttock. Asturias manages an artful balancing act, in which everything feels like some sort of macabre puppet show – an actual puppeteer figures prominently – brimming with a menacing nonchalance that seems simultaneously to amuse and accuse. A pitiful aid to the president, an essentially comic figure in his tremulous impotence, enters as if to a vague expectation of slapstick, only to be taken away for a punishment of two hundred lashes for tipping over an inkwell. The president is informed over his dinner that the man was unable to withstand the lashes and has died, to which he responds: “Well, what of it? Bring the next course!” (p. 36).

Later in the novel, the puppeteer Don Benjamin, “hardly three feet tall and as slender and hairy as a bat,” inspired by a shooting that occurred outside his home, decides to incorporate some tragedy into his children’s productions. He designs a way for his puppets to cry.

Don Benjamin thought that the painful element in the drama would make the children cry, and his surprise knew no bounds when he saw

them laugh more heartily than before, with wide open mouths and happy expressions. The sight of tears made the children laugh. The sight of blows made the children laugh. (p. 54)

While I would hope that *Single Cabbage* for its part does provide its share of laughs, the humour in it is built around a solemn core of totalitarianism, torture, war, and lies. Everyone is under constant surveillance; the source of the threat is ominously elusive and somehow self-incriminating; obligatory torture is offered at work as “therapy”; there is the question of the whereabouts of the protagonist’s brother, who is only ever seen in the context of a distant war, always surrounded by death and the threat of becoming lost; there is the nightmarish quality of a real that increasingly slips away the more closely it is examined. Yet all these qualities exist, in their ubiquity, as background, unnoticed except in certain jarring moments. In such a milieu, the action and the coping strategies of the characters provides a kind of humour that is simultaneously absurd and quite dark.

Before leaving the topic of black humour, it is worth noting one other commonality in my selected novels, and that is the use of a kind of humour in the naming of the characters in order to accentuate the extraordinary within the ordinary. While not strictly as “black” a form of humour as the foregoing examples, the unusual names do serve a function of disturbing our meaning frameworks. The cast of Lethem’s *Chronic City* includes Chase Insteadman, Perkus Tooth, Oona Laszlo, Richard Abneg. Thomas Pynchon is well known for his choice of character names: Oedipa Maas, Tyrone Slothrop, Mike Fallopian, Pig Bodine, Dr Hilarius. Asturias in *El Señor Presidente* has characters known only as the Zany and the Mosquito; Vian has a Professor Gnawkuckle and a Cardinal Yesman. What begins as startling and amusing soon becomes an accepted and quite ordinary part of the

woodwork, while retaining the power to jolt the reader with random occasional resurgences into consciousness as reminders of what we are capable of normalizing.

“I just think,” said Lethem in our Skype conversation, “that naming all your characters sort of Ed Smith and Bob Jones, that’s not where we live. It’s often as if art is being asked to be consolingly simpler than reality is. Because Perkus Tooth may sound strange to you, but the names around you, the realities around you are strange, and you’re constantly normativizing [sic] them, and art should help you stop and look and notice that you’re in that space.” (Lethem 2015)

While not consciously emulating Lethem or Pynchon when by naming my protagonist in *Single Cabbage* Bodhamari Arbop, my choice arose from a similar sensibility and a similar sense of humour. What I was doing was consciously looking for ways to establish a certain sort of contract with the reader, to signal that this is the sort of ride for which you are holding a ticket. Originally my protagonist was to be called Perkins, which struck me at first as a funny name, like Jenkins or Watkins, a name so real and so earnest that it sounds fake, tinged with irony. But it was a placeholder name, and in the early days of the writing I rejected it. Desirous of something more distinctive, I reached once again for the unconscious automatic process, this time a sort of free association of non-word sounds. One result was Arbop, which seemed like the sort of sound that might, and indeed occasionally does, emanate literally from the belly. I had my surname. From there I only knew in an equally visceral way that it needed a first name with a three-syllable minimum for rhythm and aesthetic balance, ideally one that would sound real without being real, one that would defy interrogation as to ethnicity. Bodhamari Arbop, to my ear, had a ring to it. It seemed inviting – a fun name to serve as a colourful lure. And I think it did the required work to which Lethem referred above, that of helping us

notice the abnormal in our normal, of bringing the avoidable unconscious into the unavoidable conscious: a name in a surrealist mode and of a certain tradition. It felt like a name that set the right tone for a man about to negotiate his way through a tortured reality that is prone to dissolution and paranoia.



### Chapter 3: The Terrorism Novel

It is impossible to draw a line between fiction and reality under conditions of terror, because terror lives on fiction as a category of the real.

Kirsten Mahlke, *A Fantastic Tale of Terror* (2012, p. 197)

In this chapter I will consider what it means to bring a surrealist literary mode to bear on the contemporary terrorism novel. I will do so by considering the three previously identified elements common to surrealism and my project that I have yet to address: anti-fascism, crime, and paranoia. I will begin with a brief overview of the terrain, putting some boundaries around the genre “terrorism novel,” before arguing that *Single Cabbage* contributes to an expansion of those boundaries through its application of a surrealist mode of writing.

“Terrorism novel” is difficult to define, not least because “terrorism” is difficult to define (e.g., Symeonidou-Kastanidou 2004). The term was invented shortly after the French Revolution<sup>6</sup> to describe the “new form of politics” employed by the Jacobins, who were “the first political group to enlist [terror] as an official and legalized policy” (Linton 2015 p. 11). Any clarity the concept may have briefly enjoyed in the mid-1790s has long since devolved into a “definitional quagmire...[in which] it is simply impossible to find any agreement over the meaning of ‘terrorism’” (Jackson, Jarvis et al. 2011, p. 100). The difficulties arise from considerations such as point of view, social construction, and relations of power. As

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<sup>6</sup> Also in the (slightly less immediate) aftermath of the French Revolution, the term ‘avant-garde’ was first used in a non-military context, by Count Henri de Saint-Simon. His purpose was to assign to art a leading role in the “revaluation of the imagination,” as part of a process of questioning the “reliance on reason” that had permitted, among other things, the Terror (Cottingham 2013, p. 5). The emergence of a surrealist avant-garde a century later in the aftermath of World War I may be a case of history, if not repeating itself, then perhaps rhyming (to paraphrase a quote usually attributed to Mark Twain). The parallel does no harm to the logic of applying a surrealist mode to a terrorism novel.

one study put it: “The monster is there, but what are its qualities?” (Douglass and Zulaika 1996, p. 11)

For its part, the terrorism novel dates back to the “last three decades of the nineteenth century, when the social revolutionary, the political assassin, and the dynamiter entered the stage of political and literary history” (Frank and Gruber 2012, p. 7). The genre comprises thousands of novels: A study by Appelbaum and Paknadel considered 1,081 English-language terrorism novels published between 1970 and 2001 alone before choosing 25 as a representative typology of the form (2008). Apart from the limitations of time period and language, their literary spectrum is ambitiously inclusive, aiming at “the whole range of literary production in modern times” (p. 393). The defining themes of the terrorism novel have been described narrowly as “the motives and ideas behind the sociopolitical and psychic act of terrorism” and/or the “experience of terror” (Kubiak 2004, p. 296), and more expansively as including “the aftermath of terrorist attacks...[and] the political response” (Frank and Gruber 2012, p. 12) as well as the “social and cultural implications of terrorism – such as the increasing surveillance of the public sphere” (Konig 2012, p. 155).

Kubiak includes in his typography of terrorism novels (2004) not only writing about terrorism or by terrorists, but also writing that performs terrorism. In this performative category, he refers somewhat whimsically “in the spirit of critical excess” to “attempts to destabilize narrativity itself” (p. 297), not necessarily with thematic reference to real terrorism but as an act of literary anarchy generally. Use of the category of terrorism to describe the disruption of narratives “that are thematically unrelated to the phenomenon” has rightly been called “questionable” by Frank and Gruber (2012, p. 9). Insofar as a literary strategy attempts specifically



to disrupt terrorism narratives, however, Kubiak's category of destabilisation is a valuable contribution to our conceptualisation of the genre. The terror created by such destabilisation is perhaps "the terror that is left when belief crumbles" (Howe 2002 [1957], p. 81).

The boundaries of the terrorism novel that *Single Cabbage* attempts to expand by employing a surrealist mode are simultaneously broad and narrow: drawn initially from the most generous conception of the genre, e.g., König's inclusion of sociocultural implications, then narrowed by my refinement of Kubiak's relatively obscure typological category to mean novels that disturb terrorism discourse. Devoid of actual, definite terrorists<sup>7</sup>, *Single Cabbage*'s claim to being a terrorism novel rests in part on its surveillance-heavy, permanent-emergency setting, as well as on the narrative-destabilising inseparability of the real and the imagined in its wobbling monuments and collapsing buildings. *Single Cabbage* is the kind of narrative the character Huddleberry wished for in *The Eater of Darkness*: a story "in which no one should know what crime had been committed -- nor who had committed it... [with] a dream quality about it all" (Coates 1959 [1926], p. 142).

My project has, on the face of it, an obvious resonance with novels that involve states that employ repression and surveillance, putatively as a reaction to terrorist threats. However, while *Single Cabbage* can be counted in this context among "narratives of betrayal and estrangement" (Scheingold 2010, p. 220), it is not, in my view, mainly about "states of emergency, working at cross-purposes to constitutionalism and human rights" (ibid., p. 221). Rather, I would situate the work

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<sup>7</sup> *Single Cabbage* is not alone in this regard: the Appelbaum-Paknadel typology includes two novels – *My House in Umbria* by William Trevor (1991) and *Eureka Street* by Robert McLiam Wilson (1996) – that, like *Single Cabbage*, do not identify any terrorists or turn on terrorism events; rather they reference terrorist attacks outside their respective narrative scopes, and are grounded in realism.

within the literature that goes beyond the immediate ironies of repression-in-the-name-of-liberty in order to interrogate, in the spirit of Kubiak's performative destabilisation, the psychological and social means by which political narratives are established and reinforced, collectively and personally.

Novels can perform this kind of disturbance in any of several ways, such as by reflecting on inadvertent complicity (Abish 1980); on the rivalry between writers and terrorists (DeLillo 1991); on "false flag" terrorism, in which an attack is orchestrated by one entity so as to appear to be the work of another (Edmonds 2013); on counterterrorist terror (Asturias 1980 [1946]); or on terrorism as the irruption of a "quasi-Lacanian 'real' cutting through the sutures of the 'imaginary'" of bourgeois modernity (Appelbaum and Paknadel 2008, p. 400).

I am most interested in novels that engage with what Zulaika and Douglass have called the "mythography of terror" (1996, p. x-xi). This engagement contests propaganda and other mechanisms of control but does not neglect the psychological-social interactivity that Marcuse describes as a mimetic process of introjection "to the point where even individual protest is affected at its roots [and] appears neurotic and impotent" (Marcuse 1991 [1964], p. 10).

In *Terror and Taboo*, the ethnographers Zulaika and Douglass write "as essayists perplexed by the terrorist phantasmagoria" hoping "to redirect the study of terrorism into an examination of the very discourse in which it is couched" and to question the "connections between discourse and reality" (1996, p. x-xi):

The challenge is not to learn the ultimate "truth" about terrorism, but to delve into the rhetorical bases of its powerful representations; not to insist that myths are often used to "fool" audiences, but rather to scrutinize the concrete discursive practices whereby this transpires. (ibid.)

Fiction plays a role both in reflecting and shaping the predominant cultural narratives about terror. As Appelbaum and Paknadel note with specific reference to the contributions of Zulaika and Douglass, the stakes are high in the scrutiny of terrorism discourse:

The result of this mythography is not simply a distortion of perception; it is the replacement of the perception of things with a reaction to representations. Policies end up being made, wars even end up being fought, not in response to real conflicts in the realms of social relations and politics, but in reaction to the simulacra of conflict circulated in the media by way of a mythography of terror. (Appelbaum and Paknadel 2008, p. 389)

The task described by Zulaika and Douglass, as the title of their study indicates, involves venturing into tabooed areas. In querying the discursive construction of reality by way of the forbidden, their approach to social theory mirrors my approach to writing a terrorism novel in a surrealist mode. What is shared in our respective approaches is the presumption that it is the taboos of terrorism that offer the best opportunities for considering the role of myth in setting political agendas. At every opportunity “Surrealism goes straight to the forbidden zone” (Ristić 2015 [1933], p. 202). Thus, a surrealist mode is not only an apt choice for a literary exploration of the mythography of terrorism; it also well supports Mark Fisher’s previously mentioned notion of contesting ostensible capitalist (or national security) “realism” by revealing it as “nothing of the sort” (Fisher 2009, p. 16).

The attacks of September 11, 2001, are considered by some to represent a definitive break with the literary past -- with one critic going so far as to declare, or demand, the “end of the age of irony” (Rosenblatt 2001) – while others have argued that “the history of literary representations of 9/11 can be characterized by the transition from narratives of rupture to narratives of continuity” (Keniston and Quinn 2008, p. 3). More relevant to *Single Cabbage* is a different caesura, namely

between the terrorism novels of 1870 to the early twentieth century, and those of 1970 to the present day.

Frank and Gruber (2012) have shown that terrorism novels enjoyed decades of popularity starting from the early 1870s with, for example, the publication of *Demons* (Dostoevsky 1995 [1872]). Appelbaum and Paknadel (2008) document that, after a relative paucity of entries from World War II through the early Cold War period, there was a strong resurgence of terrorism novels beginning in 1970, “stimulated by the rise of ‘left-wing terrorism’ in Western countries, left-leaning nationalist terrorism in the Middle East, and the outbreak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland” (Appelbaum and Paknadel 2008, p. 394). We can therefore roughly distinguish two distinct periods of the terrorism novel beginning a century apart. Notable contributions were also made between these two periods, for example *The Quiet American* (Greene 1956), but not with the same frequency.

In pre-1970 terrorism novels, argue Appelbaum and Paknadel, terrorists were most often depicted as suffering from “a type of philosophical and psychological derangement” and were in any case largely “ineffectual”. By contrast, the terrorists in novels since 1970 tend to be “magnificently adept” and cause “all sorts of implausible disruption” (2008, p. 401-402). I would further suggest another difference between the two periods, namely, that the earlier novels reflect an important “crisis of visibility” (Blumentrath 2012, p. 67) that seems less common in more recent works.

The early terrorism novels tended to be about anarchists and dynamiters. The availability of dynamite meant that a terrorist could secretly plant explosives and leave the scene prior to their detonation, thereby avoiding detection. This new phenomenon gave rise to an “aesthetics of indistinguishable figures, of enemies

losing their shape, and of failing identification attempts” (Blumentrath 2012, p. 69). To be sure, many novels of the period featured straightforward presentations of deranged nihilists. Yet *The Secret Agent* (Conrad 2015 [1907]) gave us a terrorist attack falsely blamed on anarchists, but with real responsibility belonging to manipulative hidden interests looking to create a justification for the repression of civil liberties; *The Man Who Was Thursday* (Chesterton 2007 [1908]) gave us a terrorist network almost unanimously comprising counterterrorist agents; *For Maimie’s Sake: A Tale of Love and Dynamite* (Allen 1886) gave us identified nihilists, but they were “ruled over by a power called ‘the Unconscious’...’immutable, divine, mysterious” (Houen 2002, p. 47-48). The same novel also gave us silent explosions that produce no flashes of light, leading to various terror-related crises of visibility and identity.

Blumentrath notes also that “the disappearance of the visible enemy” (p. 67) was mirrored, in a process that has only intensified in recent times, by an “epistemological shift in police work...[towards] a system of tracing and searching that rests upon a dissolving of mimetic effects into discrete sets of calculi, a system that consequently operates in the realm of the symbolic” (p. 81-82). A question worth asking is the extent to which the named terrorists of today represent the mythological products of symbolic operations, reflecting a “history of enmity...bound to its media” (p. 69). In an age where we have headlines in *The New York Times* like “Leader of Al Qaeda group in Iraq was fictional” (Gordon 2007), the question is not an idle one.

Despite the evident currency of notions of terrorist simulacra, literary terrorism fiction since 1970 has not been dominated by the aesthetics of a visibility crisis, failed identification, or falsified enemies. According to the Appelbaum-

Paknadel typology (which goes only through 2001), modern English-language terrorism novels, with very few exceptions, identify their straightforward terrorists very clearly: they are the IRA and Northern Irish Ultras; Palestinians; Marxists and Maoists; anarchists and nationalists; and disaffected paramilitary types. The post-9/11 terrorism novel has tended towards radical Islamic fundamentalist antagonists (Keniston and Quinn 2008 ; Frank and Gruber 2012). I would propose that what *Single Cabbage* attempts is a playful application of some of the paranoid sensibility typical of that earlier period to the terrorism of today, informed by the surrealist sensibility that originated in the intervening years.

The free indirect perspective I employed (after trying some other approaches), allowed me to blend the subjective and the objective in order to multiply uncertainties about the reliability of the point of view. The method becomes the madness, because that is the point of bringing a surrealist literary mode to the terrorism novel: it reflects the indeterminacy of much real-world terrorism, existing in its nexus of paramilitary organisations, intelligence agencies, peculiar alliances, global arms and drugs trafficking, laundered money, and uncritical media accounts (Scott 2003 ; Ganser 2004 ; Freedman and Thussu 2012 ; Valentine 2014 [1991]). While none of these concerns are dealt with in the novel explicitly, what is reflected in the novel is the notion of an unreliable reality comprising baseless assumptions and unverifiable narratives.

The remaining three signature elements that are common to surrealism and to my project are thoroughly intertwined: anti-fascism, crime, and paranoia. The relationship between the three, and their collective relationship to the terrorism novel, is implied in the following observation by Jean Baudrillard:

Is any given bombing in Italy the work of leftist extremists, or extreme-right provocation, or a centrist mise-en-scène to discredit all

extreme terrorists and to shore up its own failing power, or again, is it a police-inspired scenario and a form of blackmail to public security? All of this is simultaneously true, and the search for proof, indeed the objectivity of the facts does not put an end to this vertigo of interpretation. That is, we are in a logic of simulation, which no longer has anything to do with a logic of facts and an order of reason. (Baudrillard 1994 [1981], p. 14)

The situation encapsulated so well here virtually begs for a literary treatment that combines dreams, black humour, anti-fascism, crime, and paranoia. As I have previously argued, dreams and black humour are the signature elements that have most to do with the techniques of a surrealist mode, which is not to say they do not also represent the mode's ethos. Anti-fascism, crime, and paranoia, while not devoid of technical implications, most strongly suggest the ethos of a surrealist mode. It is to those three remaining elements that I now turn with specific reference to the terrorism novel.

### 3.1 Anti-Fascism

Humanity's aspirations for liberty must always be given the power to recreate themselves endlessly; that's why it must be thought of not as a state but as a *living force* bringing about continual progress...Liberty is not, like liberation, a struggle against sickness, it is *health*.

-- André Breton, *Arcanum 17* (2004 [1944], p. 126,128)

This country is absurd with its sentimental regard for individual liberty.

-- Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (2015 [1907], p. 20)

#### 3.1.1 Anti-Fascism and Surrealism

The surrealist "commitment to political resistance [was] directed explicitly against fascism" (Eburne 2008, p. 179), which accounts for my use of the term. But anti-fascism didn't end with Hitler and Mussolini for the original surrealists. In *Arcanum 17*, André Breton asked: "Is it true, or rather will it be certain tomorrow that this error is particularly, exclusively German?" (Breton 2004 [1944], p. 27) In

their 1947 collective declaration *Liberté est un mot Vietnamien*, the surrealists wrote: “[C]apitalism has abused that noblest of key words – ‘freedom’ -- ...with the intent to secure total control...Surrealism only has meaning so long as it stands against...the implementation of a new totalitarianism” (LaCoss 2003, p. 288). Therefore anti-fascism should be understood here as a convenient shorthand for a broader surrealist impulse, shared by my project, against the systematic repression of thought, expression, and action under authoritarian societies of control. I employ the shorthand in the same way that I gathered a variety of psychological operations under the generous umbrella of dreams in the previous chapter.

This broader sense of the term is what Umberto Eco has called Ur-Fascism. Eco notes that fascism has a “fuzziness” that allows it to take many forms, adding or shedding particular qualities but maintaining a “family resemblance”:

We must keep alert, so that the sense of these words will not be forgotten again. Ur-Fascism is still around us, sometimes in plainclothes. It would be so much easier, for us, if there appeared on the world scene somebody saying, “I want to reopen Auschwitz, I want the Black Shirts to parade again in the Italian squares.” Life is not that simple. Ur-Fascism can come back under the most innocent of disguises. Our duty is to uncover it and to point our finger at any of its new instances—every day, in every part of the world. (Eco 1995)

“The Surrealists’ denunciation of oppression was well-nigh continual” (Vaneigem 1999 [1977], p. 39), and certainly extended to opposition to any circumstances that constrained freedom of thought:

[W]hen the USSR revealed itself to be a place ‘where the most servile kind of obedience is expected, where the most basic of human rights are rejected, and where all social life orbits around the policeman and the state executioner’, the Surrealists became strident anti-Stalinists. By the end of the Spanish Civil War, they found themselves more openly aligned with Trotskyists and anarchists; after World War II, when it was immediately apparent that Stalinist state-capitalism and American Marshall Plan market expansion were as threatening to humanity as fascism had been in the 1930s, the Surrealists collaborated with anarcho-communists, anti-imperialists,



internationalists and other movements committed to radical freedom.  
(LaCoss and Spiteri 2003, p. 4)

Those are the instincts that resonate with the political sensibility infusing *Single Cabbage*, which is in part motivated by vigilance against fascism (or Ur-Fascism). It may be worth pointing out, even at the risk of stating the obvious, that an authoritarian surveillance state mentality has already done a great deal of violence to civil liberties in the United States. The issues are no secret; indeed they have been largely normalized, one by one, and in isolation they lose some of their power to alarm. When they are collected together, however, the effect remains striking: We have a permanent state of emergency (Paye 2006) featuring a global war on terror, i.e., a war of dubious legality against a poorly defined abstract concept with no geographical constraints and no prospect of victory, defeat, or conclusion (Murray 2011 ; Sanders 2011 ; Spinney 2011 ; Bacevich 2013 ; Stanford 2015); total surveillance, in which all communications are monitored and our own devices can be used to watch and listen to us (Simons and Spafford 2003 ; Miller 2014 ; Sylvain 2014 ; Ganguly 2015 ; David 2017); militarized domestic police forces with broad powers over our lives, liberties, and property, using SWAT team tactics with impunity even against those suspected only of non-violent crimes (Schaefer 2002 ; Wolf 2007 ; Whitehead 2013 ; Alexander and Myers-Montgomery 2016 ; Bolduc 2016 ; Sack 2017); centralized corporate media that (for a variety of reasons) fail to contest government narratives (Chomsky and Herman 1988 ; Borjesson 2004 [2002]; Davies 2009); protest and dissent being treated under legal provisions for terrorism (Fang 2015 ; Levin 2017 ; ACLU undated); and a loss of civil liberties to the extent that US citizens, like everyone else, can now be declared enemy combatants and be indefinitely detained or killed without recourse to due

process (Friedersdorf 2012 ; Sarah 2013 ; Georgeanne A 2014 ; Diab 2015 ; Gee 2015 ; Powell 2016).

Whether it is fair to describe the United States politically as an “emerging police state” (Whitehead 2013), or as undergoing a “fascist shift” (Wolf 2007), or as representing “inverted totalitarianism”<sup>8</sup> (Wolin 2010 [2008]), and whether we think it is justified by the demands of counterterrorism or not, the narrowing of civil liberties is self-evident. This is no small concern, to my mind, and it informs the narrative of *Single Cabbage* while providing a pathway from the surrealist ethos to contemporary politics. However, my novel does not primarily set out to critique or to ironize the character of repressive regimes, as rich as those opportunities might be. The absurdities and contradictions are certainly in themselves a magnet for a surrealist approach, but the task is incomplete if it stops at coercion and fear and neglects desire and delusion. To the extent that *Single Cabbage* contains an implicit political ambition, it is more along the lines of attack suggested by Fisher, as noted previously: to deny security realism’s purchase on the real.

In the case of the original surrealists’ anti-fascism, much has been written about their ill-fated alliance with the French communist party, and the effects on the movement of the dawning realisation of what Stalinism represented. The political experience of surrealism in this regard is most often described, including by such notables as Jean Paul Sartre, as “a pathetic failure” (Beaujour 1963, p. 90). Referring to Breton and his cohorts, Raoul Vaneigem has written that “these young people, who ought by rights to have turned themselves into theorists and practitioners of the

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<sup>8</sup> Wolin’s “inverted” totalitarianism is an authoritarian surveillance society that is systemic rather than dependent upon a single charismatic leader, deriving power and legitimacy from multiple ideologically attuned cultural institutions, creating an apathetic and demobilised population rather than an actively mobilised one, while asserting an external threat in order to maintain a state of emergency.

revolution of everyday life, were content to be mere artists thereof, waging a war of mere harassment against bourgeois society as though it fell to the Communist Party alone to mount the main offensive” (Vaneigem 1999 [1977], p. 39). But Jonathan Eburne makes a compelling case for an evolution in surrealist thinking from its brief dalliance with communism, in which surrealist practice had virtually no role to play, to a different kind of political engagement that remained truer to surrealist artistic principles while extending the movement into new territory that “confronted the stakes of incorporating violence as a political strategy” (Eburne 2008, p. 17). It is from this perspective that Eburne develops his theory of a “noir” surrealism that includes the movement’s fascination with crime and paranoia, two other signature elements that support surrealist anti-fascism, albeit somewhat obliquely.

### *3.1.2 Anti-Fascism in a Surrealist Literary Mode*

The total surveillance national security regime is particularly well suited to literary treatment in a surrealist mode. As already noted, its many absurdities, e.g., curtailing civil liberties ostensibly in order to defend freedom, have an obvious allure to practitioners of black humour. The transitions from one antagonist to another in justifying the repressive state, aided by media representations, are all too seamless. “If such Orwellian transformations in the identity of the enemy do not make us skeptical,” as Margaret Scanlan put it in her study of terrorist fiction, “an element of construction in political and journalistic rhetoric about terrorism, even in terrorist acts themselves, seems inescapable” (Scanlan 2001, p. 1). There is, beneath the hard surface of terror and counterterror, a pervasive unreality that begs exploration – that is, the nightmarish side of the surrealist fascination with dreams.

Everything seemed easy until the dogs began barking at him in the monstrous wood which separated the President from his enemies, a wood made up of trees with ears which responded to the slightest sound by whirling as if blown by a hurricane. Not the tiniest noise for

miles around could escape the avidity of those millions of membranes. The dogs went on barking. A network of invisible threads, more invisible than telegraph wires, connected every leaf with the President, enabling him to keep watch on the most secret thoughts of the townspeople. (Asturias 1980 [1946], p. 39)

In *El Señor Presidente*, Miguel Angel Asturias paints a grotesque picture of a dictatorship in an unnamed Latin American country that bears a certain resemblance to the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century Estrada Cabrera regime in Guatemala (Himmelblau 1973). In Paris during the initial development of surrealism, and in the company of surrealist writers such as Alejo Carpentier and Robert Desnos (Henighan 1996 ; García Ochoa 2016), Asturias wrote *El Señor Presidente* as a response to his personal experience living under the Cabrera dictatorship (Himmelblau 1973, p. 47-48). *El Señor Presidente* is as fine an example as there is of the application of a surrealist mode of literature to the brutal world of surveillance and the crushing of dissent.

Asturias spins his anti-fascist tale in poetic language that destabilises the narrative's sense of reality. This aesthetic choice serves and invokes the way in which political reality is dependent more on the narratives of the powerful than physical facts. The unnamed president accuses a man of murder. The accusation is false but serves political purposes; the guilt of the accused becomes official; it becomes real. "For Camila all this was either a game or a nightmare; it couldn't, no, it simply couldn't be true; what was happening, happening to her, happening to her father, couldn't be true" (Asturias 1980 [1946], p. 72). The power of authoritarian elites to shape reality according to whim reveals a breathtaking mixture of arrogance and contempt that in itself may be considered a form of terror. It calls to mind senior Bush Administration advisor Karl Rove's 2004 boast: "When we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will --

we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out" (Suskind 2004).

At issue within this anti-fascist element is not just what the state does to the people, but what the people are willing to accept as normal, the processes by which they do so, and the effects such normalisation has on their lives. I turn now to two novels that do not strongly reflect a surrealist mode, but which demonstrate exceptionally well some of the tensions that *Single Cabbage* attempts to exploit from a different stylistic angle.

In *How German Is it?*, Walter Abish evokes a fine sense of the horror that lies beneath our processes of normalisation, the constant creation of edited "amnesiac narratives" (Lethem 2015) as a survival mechanism. The novel is about a German whose father was a hero shot by the Nazis, while he himself testified against eight of his friends in order to save himself. It maintains a detached, ironic tone that highlights via understatement the ways in which we accommodate ourselves to personal and political nightmares. There is a great deal of focus on architecture, culture, and manners, into which is dropped the occasional mention of firing squads and gas chambers. These brief mentions are enough to establish quite powerfully the subtext that dominates the narrative: the effort of the unsaid to become the unthought.

Is the young American woman on the floor above mine a radical? I can easily find out for you, said the chief of police, smiling, feeling proud of the Hargenaus. Old, old family with a castle somewhere in Westphalia. Pity they decided to drop the *von*. (Abish 1980, p. 38)

The novel provides, in a setting dominated by surveillance and distrust, a meditation on cowardice, complicity, and the struggle to justify the present while forgetting the past.

*The Safety Net*, by Heinrich Böll (2010 [1979]), emphasises how indistinguishable are protection and menace under surveillance. Fritz Tolm, the protagonist, and his family are constantly under guard, i.e., watched, for fear of an assassination attempt. The surveillance extends to the whole town, which becomes flooded with policemen. Neighbours' scandals that would otherwise have remained secret are exposed; everyone becomes more distant and guarded with each other, resentful of each other. They even take to spying on each other. Surveillance becomes a cancer. It changes behaviour and values, inhibits openness and community. The blurring of terrorism and security as the primary threat is mirrored in the inverse by Tolm's daughter Sabine: the lover of the novel's main terrorist as a youth, in the end she runs away with the man responsible for her surveillance.

Meanwhile, money and power continually eat away at everything that once had value to the people in Böll's novel, from the literal power-hungriness of the encroaching coal-mining operation, eating up property and (metaphorically and physically) burying the past at an alarming rate, to the larger and increasingly more conservative newspapers gradually eating up all their smaller and more liberal competitors. What is lost more than anything else is any sense of real security – homes, livelihoods, friends, and ways of life all slip inexorably away. The repeating phrase “somewhere -- where?”, or slight variations thereof, occurring in multiple places throughout the text underscores a sense of yearning for something indefinable that is lacking in the social fabric. Neither Abish nor Böll write fully within a surrealist mode, yet they both capture the ironies and subtle tensions of the surveillance regimes in a way that suggests a reality suffering a deficiency of the real.

*Single Cabbage* treats similar themes in a different way, putting its anti-fascist sense of unreality front and centre in a way that seeks to test the limits of a surrealist mode's possibilities. Arbop's attempts to normalise his circumstances, justify his actions, and keep alive his memories – of his wife, of his brother, of his own identity – are not thematically dissimilar to the kinds of issues with which Abish engages. Likewise, *Single Cabbage*, with its invasive surveillance both performed by and imposed on Arbop and its effects on his personality and his community, while offered from a more overtly absurdist perspective, can otherwise be seen as engaged in an endeavour that is compatible with the spirit of Böll's novel. What I hope a surrealist mode brings to the literary task of contesting Ur-Fascism is a raising of the profile of the ways in which the machinery of repression is also a machinery of mystification, and the extent to which it implicates “that most terrible drug – ourselves – which we take in solitude” (Benjamin 1978, p. 54).

### 3.2 Crime

This is the story of a crime – of the murder of reality. And the extermination of an illusion – the vital illusion, the radical illusion of the world. The real does not disappear into illusion; it is illusion that disappears into integral reality.

--Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime* (2008, p. xi)

#### 3.2.1 Crime and Surrealism

Crime is probably one of the less obvious signature elements of surrealism, yet the surrealist movement clearly had a sustained fascination with the subject, particularly spectacular crime, the sort – like terrorism – that dominates front pages. From Breton's “simplest surrealist act” of shooting randomly into a crowd to Jean Clair's explicit laying of responsibility for the attacks of September 11 on “the Surrealist ideology” (Clair 2001), surrealism's linkage with the crime of terrorism is clear and complex. Indeed it is this long-term surrealist concern with crime and

terror that makes a surrealist literary mode so urgently suitable to the contemporary terrorism novel. In this section I rely heavily on Jonathan Eburne's *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* (2008), his seminal book-length treatment of the surrealist engagement with spectacular violence.

Surrealism's political evolution away from party politics to its "noir" period was marked by a shift in surrealism's primary journals, from the Marxist heavy-handedness of *La Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution* to the more artistically innovative *Minotaure*, which reflected a revived interest in the unconscious and deviancy, as well as crime and terror. In this period:

[Surrealism's] mannered proliferation of stylistic motifs exceeds its own formalism in order to evoke latent forces of terror and social dissolution at work in 'reality'... Its political use-value lies in its reassessment of the moral and epistemological bases of Surrealism's political platform, in response to a historical moment rapidly becoming – to cite the title of an article in *Minotaure* 3-4 -- an 'Age of Fear'. (Eburne 2003, p. 94)

We, too, live in an age of fear, ergo, the political use-value made of crime by surrealism is similarly important to my *Single Cabbage* project. If not for the fear of terrorism, the various indignities now associated with going through an airport, to say nothing of the loss of so many civil liberties, would likely not be tolerated. Fear itself is ripe for exploration in a surrealist mode, subject as it is to considerable irrationality, and nowhere more so than in the realm of "terrorist phantasmagoria" (Douglass and Zulaika 1996, introduction, p. x).

Terrorism discourse is characterized by the confusion of sign and context provoked by the deadly atrocity of apparently random acts, the impossibility of discriminating reality from make-believe, and text from reader. These strange processes and their mix make terrorism a queer phenomenon...[N]othing appears to be more damaging to the ghosts and myths of terrorism...than fictionalizing them further to the point that fear dissolves into "as-if" terror. The discourse's victory, then, derives from imposing a literal frame of "this *is* real war," "this *is* global threat," "this *is* total terror." Its defeat derives from writing "this is an *as-if* war," "this is an *as-*



*if* global threat,” “this is *make-believe* total terror.” (Douglass and Zulaika 1996, p. 28-29)

The confusion of sign and context into a Baudrillard-esque hyperreality is exacerbated by the complex relationship between media and war. Freedman and Thussu have noted that the Iraq War was “more than a catalogue of errors” but was “shaped for coverage, planned and formatted, pre-produced and aired with high production values, designed to persuade, not just inform”, describing this state of affairs as a “crime against democracy” (Freedman and Thussu 2012, p. 314-315). Systematic attempts to undermine the nominal functions of the political system represent “another category of offenses, described by the French poet André Chenier as ‘*les crimes puissants qui font trembler les lois*,’ crimes so great that they make the laws themselves tremble” and from which “we recoil in a general failure of imagination and nerve” (Sick 1991, p. 226). I propose that these kinds of crimes lend themselves well to consideration in a surrealist mode since they may betray our fundamental notions of the rules of reality.

Surrealism’s interest in spectacular crime, both real and fictional, dates to its earliest activities, e.g., its fascination with the Fantômas crime serials, “whose basic premise was the master villain’s capacity for entering and escaping locked rooms and impossible situations” (Eburne 2008, p. 38). It also includes “excommunicated” surrealists like André Masson, whose *Massacres* series celebrating “the dionysiac spirit” was produced as a reaction against surrealism’s political engagement with communism (Monahan 2001, p. 708). Because it may not be immediately obvious that a keen interest in crime was fundamental to the development of surrealism, and because this interest is critical to my notion of bringing a surrealist mode to bear on the terrorism novel, I will briefly review the major highlights of surrealist history vis-à-vis crime.

1921: Lautréamont and Sade

The Comte de Lautréamont and the Marquis de Sade were both formative influences on the original surrealists, appearing in Breton's writing as early as 1921 (Eburne 2008, p. 25). The former was the originator of the phrase "as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table," which became "the starting point for surrealist experiments with language" (ibid., p. 49). He also wrote *Les Chants de Maldoror*, celebrated by the surrealists "for the narrative pose of disinterestedness it affects toward its graphic depictions of murder, torture, and disfiguration" (ibid., p. 65). Sade, more famously, frequently depicted scenes of torture, murder, and rape in his works, which were defended in essays by surrealists including André Masson and Paul Éluard as offering critiques of unquestioned moral and social laws, even as they shared Marcel Hénaff's opinion that "it is utterly ludicrous to take Sade literally, to read his fictions as programs for crime and perversion" (ibid., p. 143-146).

1922: Au Clair de la Lune

"Au Clair de la lune" by Philippe Soupault (writing as Philippe Weil), a kind of locked-room mystery, appeared in the May 1922 issue of the Dadaist/surrealist journal *Littérature*. An emotionless and detailed crime scene inventory, removed from any broader frame of reference, Soupault's narrative, rather than eliminating impossibilities and uncertainties to arrive at a narrow and definite resolution, as in a traditional police procedural or detective story, "instead multiplies this doubt through its very surfeit of evidence" (Eburne 2008, p. 28). The multiplication of doubt and of possibilities is essential to surrealist thought and to my strategy in writing *Single Cabbage*.

1924: Germaine Berton

Germaine Berton was a twenty-year-old anarchist who, in early 1923, assassinated Marius Plateau, a prominent royalist and the editorial secretary of the ultra-right-wing newspaper *Action Française*. Her original intended target was the chief editor, Léon Daudet, whose sixteen-year-old son Philippe committed suicide in front of Saint-Lazare prison, where Berton was being held. The younger Daudet held anarchist sympathies and was infatuated with his father's would-be murderer; his suicide was seen as performed in her honour. A group portrait of surrealists arranged around a central image of Berton was published in the first issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* in 1924. Louis Aragon was particularly fascinated by the case, writing an essay with an "analysis and justification of the assassination...[that] foregrounded the ethical questions...without supporting the act itself" (ibid., p. 78). The surrealists were reacting to the "politicized and eroticized aesthetic relations configured around" Berton, and "Aragon's diagnosis of the fragility of social laws...replaces reason with doubt and unease" (ibid., p. 80) in a way that resonates with my own project's aforementioned interest in multiplying uncertainties in areas including crime, punishment, and justice.

1926: The Death of Nick Carter

Philippe Soupault prefigured Marcel Duhamel's later *Série Noire* (see below) crime novels with an adaptation of the dime novel form in his short story "The Death of Nick Carter," a modernist update of that detective franchise. In Soupault's treatment, Carter was "the agent in an oneiric narrative of pursuit" in which the white protagonist dies, unable to apprehend the mysterious black fugitive (Eburne 2008, p. 101). By 1926 Soupault had been expelled by the surrealists on ideological grounds, but his work "continued to share many of the group's aesthetic

and ethical preoccupations” (ibid., p. 100) and his work retained political and cultural importance for its privileging of race, particularly radical and “significant within the French colonial discourse of the 1920s for its deliberate and violent substitution of American blackness for European whiteness” (ibid., p. 101).

### 1933: The Papin Sisters

In 1933, sisters Christine and Léa Papin, cook and housekeeper in a *haute bourgeois* household, bludgeoned their employers to death with a hammer and pulled their eyes out with their bare hands. In *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*, the surrealists juxtaposed two images – one of the two girls before the murder, and one (a composite) of their mug shots, taken after the crime. The captions read, respectively, “avant” (before) and “après” (after). In the second photo the women appear to be transformed, deranged. A legend at the bottom reads “Sprung forth fully armed from a canto of *Maldoror*” (by the aforementioned Lautréamont). The surrealists did not engage in the obvious class analysis that the situation invites, and indeed focused not on the crime itself but on the change in the young women’s faces, compelling the viewer to look at the “before” image in search of signs of what was to come, and to invoke motive as a question, not an assumption, in the chillingly evocative “after” image. The image is a landscape of disorientation and disillusionment, terms which “by 1933...were no longer simply the watchwords of surrealist activity but had instead become conditions of political life under the threat of the seemingly incomprehensible rise of fascism. In this context, the surrealist image offered a new frame of reference for political judgment.” (ibid., p. 178) The Papin sisters were also the subject of “Motives of Paranoiac Crime,” the first published essay by Jacques Lacan, in the surrealist journal *Minotaure* (Lacan 1933).

1933: Violette Nozière

In Paris, also in 1933, eighteen-year-old Violette Nozière murdered her father. She spent the next week somehow eluding capture without trying, while quite openly frequenting nightclubs and jazz bars, before finally being apprehended by the police. Sensational accounts in the press told a story of a greedy, heartless, degenerate young woman of loose morals, an ungrateful child of honest working-class parents who'd do anything for the money to maintain her decadent lifestyle. Violette's own confession offered the motive that she poisoned her father to put an end to years of sexual abuse at his hands. Her explanation, however, "was roundly received with disbelief, dismissal, and contempt...Her motives, her sanity, and her underworld acquaintances became regular editorial topics in countless daily and weekly magazines" (Eburne 2008, p. 200). The surrealists, on the other hand, took her at her word and published *Violette Nozières*, a small book of poems and drawings that transforms the singular act of her crime into an "explosion of textual motifs" designed "to subvert the terms and judgments of the public response" to the crime and expose "the machinations of the French state as the repressive, proto-fascist culture it was, the surrealists argued, already becoming" (ibid., p. 201-202).

1933: Aimée

René Crevel wrote about a woman known only as Aimée, a patient of Jacques Lacan and a case study of "auto-punitive paranoia" in Lacan's 1932 doctoral thesis (Crevel 2004 [1933]; Eburne 2008, p. 185). The woman had committed some violent crimes, stabbing an actress and attempting to strangle a publisher. Crevel was a member of the original surrealist cadre and, like his compatriots, became fascinated by criminals, especially women criminals, on the grounds that "[t]he beauty of certain assaults upon modesty, or upon life, is that they

accuse, with all their violence, the monstrosity of laws and the constraints that make monsters.” (Crevel 2004 [1933], p. 266) Lacan’s articles for *Minotaure* explored similar themes (Eburne 2008).

#### 1940s onward: Noir Crime Fiction

The surrealist interest in spectacular crime and what it revealed about social mores, patriarchy, repression, and so on – in short crime-and-society as a device through which to privilege surrealism’s political and ethical concerns – extends too into the realm of fiction, and not least of all pulp detective fiction. Marcel Duhamel, a surrealist pioneer whose house at 54 Rue du Château served in the 1920s as the site of many surrealist experiments with language, automatism, and black humour (ibid., p. 252) founded in 1945 the *Série Noire* crime fiction series that popularized American-style hard-boiled detective stories for a French audience (ibid., 245-247). Eburne contends that it was Duhamel’s absorption of surrealist principles into his *Série Noire* that achieved the transformation of surrealism into the public sphere. Duhamel guided Chester Himes into writing for the *Série Noire* his enormously popular and absurd New York crime novels like *Rage in Harlem* (Himes 2011 [1957]), achieving what Eburne calls a “vernacular” surrealism that “is one of the legacies of the movement’s interest in crime, significant less for its popularity than for its implicit response to intellectual conditions in France after the Second World War” (Eburne 2008, p. 246). Gilles Deleuze, writing in celebration of the series’ thousandth title in 1966, noted that, for epistemological as well as aesthetic and moral reasons, these were no ordinary detective novels: their proliferation of falsehoods and uncertainties mirrored the process that “permits a society, at the limits of cynicism, to conceal that which it wishes to conceal, to show that which it

wishes to show, to deny evidence and to proclaim the unrealistic” (Eburne 2008, p. 253.).

Separately but similarly, Léo Malet, “who joined the surrealist movement in 1931 as a young anarchist agitator and cabaret singer” (ibid., p. 250), attained notoriety for his detective novels while continuing an engagement with surrealist practices, “composing new ‘surrealist’ poems as late as 1983” (ibid., p. 251). Boris Vian, surrealist author of *Froth on the Daydream* and *Autumn in Peking*, wrote a series of controversial quasi-parodic, semi-surrealist, hard-boiled crime novels under the pseudonym Vernon Sullivan, including the extremely absurd *To Hell with the Ugly*, described by its translator as “like a pornographic Hardy Boys novel set on the Island of Dr Moreau to a be-bop soundtrack” (Vian 2011 [1948]) (I can vouch for the accuracy of the description).

It is of course true that, as playfully absurdist and rich in black humour and subversive ideas as they often are, these kinds of noir detective novels (even the ones written by avowed surrealists) are at something of a remove from the typical techniques of surrealism. I think it is fair to say that they represent a derivative or offshoot of the movement, reflecting something of the surrealists’ ethical and political legacy in the way they locate criminography – “the notion of crime as an art, as a form of inscription” (Eburne 2008, p. 9) – as a site of exploring society’s unconscious. They also represent the evolving spirit of surrealism living on and manifesting in new ways with new artists.

Like Cahun’s ideas about surrealist poetry, Himes’s black humor [e.g., in *Rage in Harlem*] contradicts the existentialist faith in African American vernacular forms as means of expression alone, suggesting instead that they “guard their secrets” in order that their political anger, their unconscious, subterranean cachet of revolutionary knowledge and desire, remain open. So too...does there remain an openness within surrealist discourse more broadly; no longer limited to the active movement, this discourse was distributed throughout

postwar intellectual life, and throughout the world, as an intransigent form of political expression as much attuned to the “mysterious exchange of humorous pleasure” as to the objective recognition of social injustice. (Eburne 2008, p. 265)

In any case, I hope these examples from throughout the history of surrealism suffice to demonstrate an extended surrealist engagement with spectacular crime, a rubric that easily accommodates terrorism. My interest in bringing a surrealist mode to bear on the terrorism novel of today is to disturb terrorism discourse and its underlying assumptions, using the reality-querying strengths of surrealist principles.

### 3.2.2 Crime in a Surrealist Mode

*Single Cabbage* cannot claim to be the first novel to highlight uncertainty, deception, and the fragility of purported reality with reference to terrorism. Indeed, Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (2015 [1907]) was already immersed in misdirection, false flags, and the various difficulties of determining responsibility when bombs explode at random. While the novel predates surrealism and is not particularly dreamlike, it remains notable in the context of my project for the terrorism currency in which it does trade: uncertainty and mystification.

Set in the London of 1886, *The Secret Agent* tells the story of a bombing attributed to an ineffective group of anarchists, but actually done at the bidding of a foreign embassy desirous of seeing a more repressive Britain. Conrad’s protagonist Mr Verloc, a member of the anarchist group who doubles as an agent of the unnamed foreign country’s embassy, is called by that embassy’s First Secretary, a Mr Vladimir, to receive his instructions:

“England must be brought into line...What they want just now is a jolly good scare...A series of outrages...executed here in this country; not only *planned* here – that would not do – they would not mind. Your friends could set half the Continent on fire without influencing the public opinion here in favour of a universal



repressive legislation. They will not look outside their backyard here.” (Conrad 2015 [1907], p. 20-21)

What we have in *The Secret Agent* is not a repressive state pushing back against terrorism, but falsified terrorism providing the pretext for an increase in repression. The repression is not a means to an end, but is in itself a desired end, a precondition for a controllable, fear-based society. The attack in the novel is literally and figuratively an assault on reason: the bomb was intended to explode in the Greenwich Observatory (but explodes prematurely by accident) – an attack on science. “The attack must have all the shocking senselessness of gratuitous blasphemy. Since bombs are your means of expression, it would be really telling if one could throw a bomb into pure mathematics. But that is impossible.” (p. 23)

If the attack is on reason, the casualty is certainty. The crime is rendered more cruel by its deceptive nature, perpetrated not by those expected to attack the symbolic order, but by the symbolic order itself. It is a crime of betrayal, by definition the hardest crime to anticipate, the hardest crime to believe, the hardest crime to accept.

“I mean to say, first, that there’s but poor comfort in being able to declare that any given act of violence -- damaging property or destroying life -- is not the work of anarchism at all, but of something else altogether -- some species of authorized scoundrelism. This, I fancy, is much more frequent than we suppose...[T]he existence of these spies amongst the revolutionary groups which we are reproached for harboring here, *does away with all certitude*” (p. 93, emphasis added).

Similarly, G.K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday* (Chesterton 2007 [1908]) challenges presumptions about terrorist identities by portraying a cabal of

terrorists infiltrated by counterterrorism agents to the point of excluding real terrorists. Chesterton's absurd adventure implies that the only thing to fear about terrorism is fear itself, a conclusion that may not inspire much confidence a century later. On the other hand, quite apart from the question of false flags and real responsibility, even today a US citizen is statistically more likely to be killed by falling furniture than any terrorist (Shaver 2015). So Chesterton's observation that the fear is out of proportion to the threat remains valid, as does his notion of the sometimes absurd melding of terror and counterterror. Consider, for example, how many of the FBI's successes in foiling terrorist plots were achieved against plots the Bureau itself instigated (Shipler 2012 ; Human Rights Watch 2014 ; Greenwald and Fishman 2015).

*The Assignment, Or, On the Observing of the Observer of the Observers* by Friedrich Dürrenmatt (2008 [1986]), also multiplies uncertainties related to a presumed act of terrorism, and in a way that is often strongly evocative of dreams while interrogating the slippery nexus of reality, the media, and terrorism. *The Assignment* also contains other themes that resonate with those in *Single Cabbage*, namely the idea of false leads and faulty assumptions, and the idea of confronting oneself in pursuing a mystery. Its notably experimental design, creating a stream of consciousness effect, also reflects elements of a surrealist literary mode.

*The Assignment* is written in twenty-four chapters of one long sentence each, reportedly inspired by and intended to parallel the twenty-four movements of *Bach's The Well-Tempered Clavier I* (Dürrenmatt 2008 [1986], from the foreword by Theodore Ziolkowski, p. xiv). In addition to fleetingly surreal imagery – a recurring woman in a red coat, sometimes glimpsed in paintings, which might be framed mirrors, is it or is it not our protagonist? – the effect of being forced to read a

sentence that extends for several pages is that one cannot hold the whole of it in mind at once. There is no single point being made per sentence, but a multiplicity of points, subjects, meanings, that must be suspended simultaneously in the mind as if in mid-air, not so much grasped by rational intellect as held aloft by one's breathing. One can almost feel the furrowed, mechanistic part of the brain giving up the struggle, abandoning the notion of following along using reason, instead rising, broadening, thinning, yielding to some intellectual meta-level of hovering aimless concentration extending in all directions like a literal bubble of delicate attention. It is as if a trance-like state is induced in the reader, who has no choice but to read in a boundary-less surrealist mode simply to survive the sentence. It is a playful, if pitiless, technique.

Much of the imagery and the overall tone in *The Assignment* is evocative of dreams and therefore very much in a surrealist mode in that sense as well. The novel opens with Otto von Lambert having received the news of his wife's murder in an unnamed Arab land suggestively placed in North Africa, and a description of his arrangement for her body to be flown across the Mediterranean by helicopter, the coffin suspended below the craft by ropes "so that it trailed after it slightly, over vast stretches of sunlit land, through shreds of clouds, across the Alps in a snowstorm, and later through rain showers, until it was gently reeled down into an open grave surrounded by a mourning party" (p. 3). This description, as noted, occurs in a long and circuitous sentence that also relates details of the murder, its location, biographical information about von Lambert, his observations of the funeral, his handling of an umbrella, and his arrangements to meet with a film crew led by our protagonist, a woman known only as F., in order to give her and her team an assignment. The rapid-fire, condensed parcelling-out of information and plot

developments in this manner feels clinically detached, as if we are experiencing the story by watching it unfold in a tiny box far below us, an incongruous feeling given the intimacy of some of the details.

F.'s descent into a country known only as M., on the trail of a terrorist who, it eventually transpires, has not murdered the presumed victim but another woman in the same red coat, a coat which F. ends up wearing, is also a dreamlike excursion where nothing is clear, everything fades out around the edges. F. ends up being led to a horrifying underground labyrinth in the midst of a missile-testing range where her murderer-to-be, who turns out to be not a terrorist but an insane former bomber pilot called Achilles, pounds relentlessly on the door behind which he himself is locked courtesy of Polypheme, his accomplice-caretaker, until the time comes. This information is imparted to us and to F. in a matter-of-fact way, and we are not privy to any emotions F. might be feeling, again creating a feeling of unreality somewhere between surrealist and existentialist. The circumstances also imply the permeability of the boundaries between militarism and terror.

The novel is full of commentary that would be variously at home in an essay by Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, Hannah Arendt, or Jean-Paul Sartre: "man was staggering along in the mad hope of somehow finding someone to be observed by somewhere" (p. 20); the self-conscious creation of "a fiction of selfhood" (p. 25); a world of "interlocking realities, one of them cruel and demonic, the other as banal as tourism itself" (p. 48); the observation that "nonterrorists were also capable of atrocities, Auschwitz, for instance, was not the work of terrorists but of state employees" (p. 58); the experience of the feeling that "freedom was the trap into which she was expected to flee" (p. 89); a war that had "long lost its political meaning, it was a make-believe war...its only meaning resided in the fact that it

could be observed” (p. 94-95); “what you call reality, she said, is staged” (p. 119); and so on. Here is a novel then that, in its own way, reflects a dreamlike as well as an anti-fascist sensibility in its treatment of terrorism, employing several of the elements that I am arguing *Single Cabbage* shares with surrealism.

Not all invocations of a blurred fiction-reality with regard to terrorism necessarily imply the utilisation of a surrealist literary mode. Don DeLillo spends much of *Mao II* (1991) reflecting on the terrorist as a competitor with the novelist for influence on shaping the “inner life of the culture” (p. 41). While he raises no particular challenges to certainty with his standard-issue embittered, Western-values-hating (and vaguely Maoist) Arab terrorist, DeLillo does keenly appreciate the value of terrorism as a narrative with great power as a force for manipulation. He is also quite prescient, with several ominous mentions of the “looming” World Trade Center towers (before even the 1993 attack), and talk of explosions in the air and buildings coming down.

“What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our [novelists’] decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous...Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings.” (p. 157)

But the most interesting parts of *Mao II*, to my mind, are those in which DeLillo allows himself to explore the narrativization – the fictionalization – of reality, at least in general terms, and with an appreciation for its effect on culture and meaning:

When you inflict punishment on someone who is not guilty, when you fill rooms with innocent victims, you begin to empty the world of meaning and erect a separate mental state, the mind consuming what’s outside itself, replacing real things with plots and fictions.

One fiction taking the world narrowly into itself, the other fiction pushing out toward the social order, trying to unfold into it. (p. 200)

From the perspective of terrorism literature in a surrealist mode, this could serve as a promising entry point to a multiplication of uncertainties, but that journey is not the one DeLillo had in mind in *Mao II*. The passage refers on the one hand to the taking of a poet as hostage, which “drains the world of one more thimble of meaning” (p. 200), and also more generally to reason’s desperate attempts to make sense of the conundrum of calculated unreason. However, as much as it wrestles creatively with the implications of the standard view of terrorism for art and society, it doesn’t do much to shake it by its roots. This is not to imply a failing on DeLillo’s part, but to note that this is not what he is trying to do in this instance. Similarly, his tantalizing references to the constructedness of our understanding stop short of exploring that notion’s more radical implications.

“We understand how reality is invented. A person sits in a room and thinks a thought and it bleeds out into the world. Every thought is permitted.” (p. 132)

Contrarily, *Single Cabbage*, consistent with surrealism, does not presume fair competition in an open marketplace of ideas, but a world in which many thoughts are not permitted. As in the cases of the surrealist engagement with Lautréamont or the Papin sisters or Violette Nozière, in a surrealist mode one always seeks the unpermitted thoughts, to transgress what taboos may be found in order to “change that sorcery-bundle of mythical representations on which Western culture is based” (Taussig 1987, p. 201). Taboos are the boundaries of that sorcery-bundle and none is more powerful in our age than straying outside the accepted discourse of terrorism.

In sum, the importance to my project of the surrealist and surrealist-derivative engagement with crime is three-fold. It establishes spectacular crime, of which terrorism is certainly a prominent variety, as a subject that is solidly within

the bounds of a surrealist mode of expression; it supports the notion that “surrealist discourse” has survived “the active movement”; and, I would suggest, it connects to certain of *Single Cabbage*’s oneiric themes pertaining to the difficulties of knowing what we think we know. “We have to restore the potency and the radical meaning of illusion, which is...the way things have of presenting themselves for what they are when they are not actually there at all” (Baudrillard 2008, p. 17) – a paranoid enough notion to serve as a segue into a discussion of the last of my five proposed signature elements of surrealism.

### 3.3 Paranoia

And so we alight one final time on the twin themes of proof and existence, delusion and reality. A shiver – the willies – is predicated on the suspension of certainty, or more accurately, the possibility of the existence of the uncanny as real.

-- George E. Marcus, *Paranoia within Reason* (1999, p. 29)

#### 3.3.1 Paranoia and Surrealism

The surrealist interest in paranoia is, like the surrealist interest in crime, a function of what Eburne calls the movement’s “noir” period of the 1930s. Both an aesthetic and an ethical concern, as Adorno observed, “the tension in Surrealism that is discharged in shock is the tension between schizophrenia and reification” (Adorno 1991 [1956], p. 88). Noteworthy examples of surrealism’s interest in paranoia include Salvador Dali’s development of his paranoiac-critique, as articulated for example in his 1930 essay “The Rotting Donkey,” originally published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (Dali 2004 [1930]), and in writings on paranoia by René Crevel and Jacques Lacan in the surrealist journal *Minotaure*.

In Dali’s argument, which recognises “the image of desire hidden behind the simulacra of terror,” paranoia represents a thought process that promises the ability “to systematize confusion and thereby contribute to a total discrediting of the world

of reality” (Dali 2004 [1930], p. 257). He speaks of reality as comprising multiplicities of images, simulacra competing to attain “the highest potential for existence” (ibid.) and breaking down certainties by destroying ideologically derived confidence in any given image of reality. Dali’s method “reasserts an often lost continuity between the delusional and rational – retying the knot of their mutual genesis” (Hunt 1999, p. 21). Paranoia became “a means for the modernist withdrawal from consensual language...[forming] a bridge between the unconscious of the individual and the mass” (Constantinidou 2010, p. 131-132).

Proceeding from Lacan’s then-recent doctoral thesis, René Crevel in his “Notes Towards a Psycho-dialectic” (2004 [1933]) similarly describes the “paranoiac psychosis” not as a purely mental dysfunction but as an interactivity between subjective experience and objective external reality, so that understanding it becomes a matter of “throwing light upon the inside as well as the outside” (p. 266). The surrealist view of paranoia was that it was like a “highly sensitive microscope” through which “we notice the interdependence of internal and external phenomena” (ibid.). What Lacan called paranoia’s “new syntax” was taken by the surrealists as “a representation of complex structures of social and psychological determination that could be mobilized for the sake of political understanding” (Eburne 2008, p. 180).

The determination of labels like insane or paranoid, not unlike the determination of what constitutes terrorism or security or freedom, is substantially a question of power relationships – which is not to say that these concepts never correspond to realities or that determinations can never be made, but that there is a good case to be made for treading very carefully. As Rosenhan put it in his study of whether medical professionals could tell the sane from the insane in a clinical



setting, “Whenever the ratio of what is known to what needs to be known approaches zero, we tend to invent ‘knowledge’ and assume that we understand more than we actually do” (Rosenhan 1973, p. 257). A surrealist literary mode, approaching questions of sanity and delusion with a dreamlike sensibility and playful black humour, may stimulate critical openness in an area where misplaced certainty is the problem.

In her memoir *Down Below* (Carrington 2017 [1944]), Leonora Carrington was in part “redirecting paranoid theory toward contemporary surrealist thinking about collective social myths” (Eburne 2008, p. 218). From this perspective, reflecting on paranoia can reveal as much about society and health as it does about illness by analysing subjectivity from the perspective of social signifiers. Carrington understood the political use-value of paranoia as deriving from its characterization of “accepted formulas” – ideological forces – as the very substance that must be purged, first of all from herself, and also from society, in order for there to be a liberation of the surreal kind – a liberation of the imagination. While liberating oneself from consensual reality may be as likely to lead to a crippling derangement as to any form of enlightenment, it is, to a degree, a necessary risk if one is to shed the constraints of illusion and to resist, for example, the effects of skilful propaganda. For Carrington, these “accepted formulas” of bourgeois society amounted to what she called a “thick layer of filth” of which she needed to be cleansed as she processed her own flight from fascism and the arrest of her lover, Max Ernst, by the Gestapo. The paranoia she later analysed from a surrealist perspective in *Down Below* was first experienced directly when she became “convinced that parts of Europe were becoming hypnotized by agents of Hitler” (Hertz 2010, p. 100).

Paranoia, as a concomitant of the full embrace of a strategy of doubting reality and gravitating towards the taboo, is essential to the logic of a surrealist mode. This is particularly so in a political context representing the implicit suspicion that the justifications for repression and the loss of liberties may represent a form of cultural gaslighting.

### 3.3.2 Paranoia in a Surrealist Literary Mode

How long will we have to wait for a brand new laboratory where established ideas, *no matter which*, beginning with the most elementary ones, the ones most hastily exonerated, will be accepted only for purposes of study, contingent on an examination *from top to bottom* and by definition free from all preconceptions?

-- André Breton, *Arcanum 17* (2004 [1944], p. 61)

As a fount of potential unrealities, the suggestive political context of *Single Cabbage*'s setting invites the artistic paranoia that a ceaselessly questioning surrealist mode is so ready to provide. What interests me most about paranoia as it pertains to terrorism novels generally, and the writing of *Single Cabbage* in particular, is the way it looks at itself accusingly in the mirror, one real-life paranoia reflecting another. On one side of the mirror are the maligned conspiracy theories, commonly considered to be pathologically (and contemptibly) paranoid. Indeed, because the term "conspiracy theory" is almost always used as a pejorative (Featherstone 2000 ; Sunstein and Vermeule 2008 ; Heilbrunn 2011 ; Kay 2011 ; Mortimer 2015 ; Oaklander 2015), one could be forgiven the impression that political paranoia is the exclusive purview of obsessive, delusional fantasists, even if some of them are otherwise "more or less normal people" (Hofstadter 1964, p. 77).

This impression, however, is profoundly false. On the other side of the mirror is a mainstream political environment brimming with paranoid conspiracy theories from stem to stern. Paranoia and plots are the water in which we swim, therefore we do not always recognise them by those names.

Conspiracy theories are everywhere; the United States was founded on them. The men who drafted the Federalist Papers and the US Constitution presumed that “representative democracy was vulnerable to, in their language, ‘conspiracies against the people’s liberties’ by ‘perfidious public officials,’ and to ‘tyrannical designs’ by ‘oppressive factions’” (deHaven-Smith 2013, p. 55). The United States is a nation that has long considered itself besieged, from the Cold War threat of reds under beds to today’s New York City subway slogan “if you see something, say something.” If it’s not Russia trying to meddle in our elections, it’s terrorists lurking in every dissenting shadow. Paranoia and conspiracy theories are intrinsically neither remarkable nor objectionable. What is intriguing then is the question of why those terms retain pejorative power. In an age dominated by competing conspiracies, total surveillance, and the real or overblown threat of terrorism, the paranoid element of surrealism has never been more relevant. “Paranoid art is the ultimate opposite, the urgent opposite, of complacent art” (Lethem 2012a).

One of the ways of describing the difference between the two types of conspiracy theories – the ones that are widely held up as objects of scorn and the ones we consume unperturbed in the news with our morning coffee – is in terms of compatibility or lack thereof with the beliefs of the big Other. A tension arises from our efforts variously to conform to and distinguish ourselves from that symbolic order, e.g., to be socially acceptable while protecting our more idiosyncratic personal views. It is that space between the official narratives and the thoughts we entertain in private or on the margins that provides such fertile literary soil, particularly for a surrealistic treatment of terrorism.

As an example of the gap between sanctioned and unsanctioned thought, it remains taboo even after fifty years for a major newspaper to take the idea of a JFK

assassination conspiracy seriously, even though that is precisely what a majority of US citizens have long believed (Swift 2013). The same kind of taboo is even stronger regarding the more recent events of September 11, 2001, yet over a third of US citizens – and half of New Yorkers – believe that elements of the US government either “assisted in the 9/11 attacks” or had foreknowledge of the attacks and “consciously failed to act” (Zogby International 2004 ; Hargrove 2006).

The prevalence of these conspiratorial views says nothing about their relationship to the truth<sup>9</sup>. It says a good deal, however, about the relationship between private individuals and the big Other. It suggests that behind the decorum of our implicit agreements regarding a consensual normal lies a tension between rational and irrational, paranoia and practicality, fact and fiction. This is one basis of the tension I endeavour to exploit in *Single Cabbage*. That tension, however, is also heightened by the troubled empirical grounds upon which conspiracy theories are either mainstreamed or marginalised.

If it were simply a matter of evidence, with poorly supported theories going into the paranoid conspiracy bin and well-supported ones into the public record of historical reality, the situation would be very much less interesting to me as a writer. But this is not at all the case. Indeed the fascination for me begins with the observation that – despite so many examples of “facts being fixed” (Van Natta Jr. 2006) around narratives and unwelcome evidence being ignored or dismissed (Carden 2017) – suggestions that a given justification for war might be a pretext are still so often treated with that special derision reserved for conspiracy theorists.

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<sup>9</sup> Similar percentages of US citizens also believe in creationism (Swift 2017) and angels (Associated Press 2011).

Thus, the existence of widespread yet illicit and often invisible private beliefs is why buildings crumble and Kennedy persists in the dreamlike haze of *Single Cabbage*<sup>10</sup>. Such beliefs represent a contested psycho-political space that confirms paranoia's importance as a signature element of a surrealist literary mode. No particular conspiracy is suggested in the pages of *Single Cabbage*, yet the narrative is thoroughly infused with unreliable attributions of agency. *Single Cabbage*'s playful conspiracy-mindedness is generalised, not specific. It is also informed by genuine ruptures in the historical terrorism narrative that lend its surrealist approach a certain currency by underscoring that these "blurry realities" are not merely an intellectual conceit. Examples of such ruptures that were important to me in conceiving *Single Cabbage* include the exposures of Operation Northwoods and Operation Gladio – which is the subject of three novels I shall consider below.

Operation Gladio was a NATO programme, begun in the immediate aftermath of World War II and likely directed by the CIA, the purpose of which was to establish secret paramilitary organisations – "stay behind armies" – in multiple European countries nominally to fight behind enemy lines in the event of a Soviet invasion (Ganser 2004). These well-armed paramilitaries predominantly comprised Nazi or neo-Nazi far-right members, and reported directly to intelligence agencies rather than through regular military channels. Their existence was in many cases entirely unknown to their host countries' leaders.

As a result of an Italian investigation led by judge Felice Casson, it was established that several terrorist attacks that had long been blamed on leftist groups

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<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, *Single Cabbage*'s subplot about Kennedy's missing brain derives from the real-life mystery of Kennedy's actually missing brain.

were actually the work of Gladio cells. Judge Casson explained that Gladio was a “strategy of tension,” the purpose of which was “to promote conservative, reactionary social and political tendencies” (Ganser 2004, p. 7). Gladio was successfully kept secret for more than forty years before its eventual exposure. The furore from the Italian case led to Gladio’s exposure in other European countries.

Operation Northwoods, made public in 1997 as part of a document declassification mandated by the Assassination Records Review Board, proposed the performance of terror attacks within the United States, to be blamed on Cuba as a way to justify overt military action against Castro. That plan was rejected by President Kennedy only after being authorized by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (Davis 2006). One can argue that its rejection proves that false flag attacks are unlikely to be perpetrated by the United States, or conversely that it was only thwarted in this instance by an extraordinary president. In either case, it provides a disturbing glimpse into the mind-set of the defence/intelligence establishment, at least at one point in time. It proves, if nothing else, that false flag attacks orchestrated by the United States are far from unthinkable.

The historical record therefore shows unequivocally that terrorist attacks are not always what they seem, and that, despite the intuitive objections that “it would involve too many people” or “somebody would talk,” massive false flag conspiracies can indeed be kept secret for long periods of time. The paranoid questions raised, as thematic subtexts of *Single Cabbage*, include: How far might this sort of thing go? Has the full extent of it already been revealed? On what rational basis ought we to be sanguine in our contempt of conspiracy theories? These questions hearken back to the spectre of cultural gaslighting as previously described. I contend that paranoia in a surrealist literary mode is a supremely

suitable approach to negotiating this slippery, post-9/11, post-truth netherworld and the mechanisms by which narratives become or fail to become accepted as facts. But it is not the only way.

Eco's *Numero Zero*, Steve Chambers' *Gladio: We Can Neither Confirm Nor Deny*, and Sibel Edmonds' *The Lone Gladio* all address Operation Gladio explicitly in different ways. With the exception of a few reality-bending touches by Eco, nothing in any of these novels serves as an example of paranoia in a surrealist literary mode. However, a discussion of all three will be a useful way to illustrate by contrast what a surrealist mode brings to literary paranoia, as Gladio lurks silently in the background among *Single Cabbage*'s political informants.

Steve Chambers' novel *Gladio: We Can Neither Confirm Nor Deny* (2014) takes a speculative but firmly realist approach to fictionalising a Gladio-based narrative around the real-life case of Barry Prudom. Prudom killed a police officer near Menwith Hill, a joint British-US military and spy base that is today "a vital part of the NSA's sprawling global surveillance network" (Gallagher 2016). Prudom was known to have undergone British Special Air Service (SAS) training in a unit that specialised in, among other things, "stay behind" operations – suggesting a connection to Gladio and its "stay behind" armies<sup>11</sup>. Prudom used his specialised skills to elude police for some seventeen days, killing two other people along the way, before either committing suicide or being killed by a team that included one of his SAS instructors. His presence near the surveillance installation and his motive in killing the police officer remain unexplained. *Gladio: We Can Neither Confirm Nor Deny* ventures a fictional narrative in place of the missing details, and includes an

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<sup>11</sup> "As the Gladio scandal erupted in 1990 the British press observed that 'it is now clear that the elite Special Air Service regiment (SAS) was up to its neck in the NATO scheme, and functioned, with MI6, as a training arm for guerrilla warfare and sabotage'." (Ganser 2004, p. 44. Internal quote from Searchlight, January 1991.)

assortment of facts that are real, such as a women's peace camp set up at the perimeter of Menwith Hill, but not necessarily really connected to the Prudom story. Chambers puts the Prudom figure (called Billy Hatton in the novel) near Menwith Hill to assassinate one of the women of the peace camp. The woman is targeted because (as it turns out) she knew too much about the Vatican-related funding mechanisms of Gladio<sup>12</sup>. Hatton was forced to shoot the police officer who stumbled upon his hiding place.

The novel's genesis came in the form of conversations between Chambers and a journalist friend who had investigated the case, followed up the Gladio line of enquiry, and was warned by Special Branch to drop the matter (Chambers 2017). In the novel's fictionalised treatment, the involvement of Gladio is clear, as the title makes explicit. Hatton confesses the connection to the journalist-protagonist whom he briefly holds hostage, and it is subsequently confirmed by other characters. Chambers extends the connection by tying the Prudom/Hatton storyline to Gladio's rumoured involvement in "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland. This connection again relies on informed conjecture, building on revelations of SAS activity in Northern Ireland where they were reportedly "part of the problem" (Ganser 2004, p. 44), and making passing reference to the Shankill Road bombing, whose chief perpetrator was recently revealed to have been simultaneously the Ardoyne IRA commander and a British Special Forces informant (Morris 2016).

Despite drawing on a related collection of historical facts and allegations, there is no claim here, explicit or implicit, that the fictionalised version accurately represents the events and background of the actual Prudom story. By design,

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<sup>12</sup> Allegations of Vatican involvement in Gladio's financial arrangements are also real, as detailed for example in Paul L. Williams' *Operation Gladio: The Unholy Alliance between the Vatican, the CIA, and the Mafia* (2015).



Chambers' approach, as the novel's subtitle implies, treads a line between asserting and merely hypothesizing a far-reaching web of real-life deceit involving Gladio's terrorist provocations. While it may well provoke some readers to do further research into the history of Operation Gladio, I do not presume that to be Chambers' primary goal in writing the book. Rather, I would characterise the novel as a compelling action-mystery, employing a tantalising "what if" scenario to good effect. It remains a political novel by virtue of being based on real events, plausibly connected to a genuine hidden history. These connections to the political real give the narrative an edge, intentionally designed to "bear witness" to a real truth (Chambers 2017), without forcing the reader to confront the narrative as history.

By contrast, in her message-thriller *The Lone Gladio* (2013), Sibel Edmonds is very much trying to force exactly that kind of confrontation. As a translator for the FBI in the wake of 9/11, Edmonds was privy to highly sensitive material captured by surveillance operations. Her discovery and reporting-to-superiors of a network of foreign agents and corrupt high-level US officials in an enterprise involving nuclear secrets, espionage, blackmail, drug trafficking, and terrorism resulted not in gratitude and congratulations, but in her being harassed and ultimately fired from her FBI position (Rose 2005 ; Edmonds 2012). She testified to Congress, and to the 9/11 Commission, but her testimony was classified. Although her allegations were called credible by two US senators and a Department of Justice investigation, she had the seldom-used State Secrets Privilege invoked against her twice to prevent her from testifying in public; the American Civil Liberties Union called her "the most gagged person in the history of the United States" (Giraldi 2009).

At the core of her allegations is Operation Gladio. Edmonds claims to have seen files on a program the FBI refers to as Gladio B, which is a continuation of Operation Gladio by other means. According to Edmonds, instead of using neo-Nazi paramilitaries as in the original Gladio, Gladio B sponsors and uses Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups for similar purposes, in a new strategy of tension. She alleges that high-level al Qaeda representatives including Ayman al-Zawahiri “had innumerable, regular meetings at the U.S. embassy in Baku, Azerbaijan, with U.S. military and intelligence officials between 1997 and 2001...right up to 9/11... to participate in Pentagon-backed destabilisation operations” (Ahmed 2013).

Limited by the gag orders, Edmonds turned to thin fictionalisation in the form of a novel to convey her allegations to the public. In *The Lone Gladio*, mosques are set up by the CIA as fronts for planning terror events using mercenaries posing as jihadis. This depiction further extends and complicates existing public accounts, such as the story of Ali Mohamed, “who worked at times for the FBI, CIA, and U.S. Army...[and] while still on the U.S. Army payroll...was training candidates at the al-Kifah Center [in Brooklyn, NY] for al Qaeda’s jihad” (Scott 2007, p. 151-152). This undisputed if awkward fact is often elsewhere described as a US intelligence failure or blunder (e.g., Lance 2004), rather than as part of an intentional strategy, as Edmonds depicts.

While it is impossible to determine with certainty where facts, if any, end and fiction begins in Edmonds’ account, some of the novel’s implicit claims have subsequently been corroborated: A character based on former US Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, heavily implicated in a variety of corrupt endeavours, engages in paedophilia in the novel while under surveillance by multiple agencies;

three years after the novel was published, Hastert was imprisoned for charges relating to the sexual abuse of minors (Smith 2016).

*The Lone Gladio*, in short, is offered as the closest thing to Edmonds' secret testimony that the public is allowed to hear, and is explicitly intended to shape public opinion about the nature of the national security state. This attempt to shift the terrorism/security discourse via realist literature is an appeal to the rational. As with Chambers' novel, it may inspire some readers to do further research, and may convince others immediately of the likelihood that there is treachery afoot. But it is no easy task to change political opinions with purported facts (Lindström 1997), even when they are not intentionally fictionalised. Facts, while indispensable, are often treated warily, quite rightly, as they always require verification, context, and interpretation. Still, the problem of determining what is actually going on and what it means is acute at the present historical moment, when accusations of "fake news" are glibly exchanged as a way of walling off competing and irreconcilable narratives that often reject and ignore rather than engage and debate each other.

It is for such reasons that paranoia in a surrealist literary mode more or less abandons contestable facts and unresolvable arguments in favour of seducing the imagination and eroding the foundations of our unconscious assumptions. I do not propose that a surrealist mode is superior to the "ordinary" realist approach, but that it is a useful complement. There is a futile circularity to the proposition of throwing more facts at a mind-set known precisely for its resistance to empirical evidence. Facts and rationality are clearly necessary tools for accessing truth but just as clearly insufficient. Terrorism discourse has suffered from what Michael Taussig has called "the politics of epistemic murk and the fiction of the real" (1987, p. xiii) to the point where debate quickly encounters taboo. The situation suggests the need for

alternative approaches. “If mere words, the language of public discourse, are debased, the writer may well wish to turn to more intuitive models of communication, the discourse of private symbolism and even madness” (Scanlan 2001, p. 81).

In highlighting the role of power and ideology in establishing political narratives that have illusory aspects, a paranoid surrealist mode seeks “to penetrate the veil while retaining its hallucinatory quality” (Taussig 1984, p. 472):

The political and artistic problem is to engage with that, to maintain that hallucinatory quality while effectively turning it against itself. That would be the true catharsis, the great counterdiscourse whose poetics we must ponder in the political terrain now urgently exposed today. (Taussig 1984, p. 472)

Umberto Eco’s approach in *Numero Zero* (2016) employs a robustly absurdist approach that reflects black humour, anti-fascism, crime, and paranoia in its explicit treatment of Operation Gladio. The novel features an ambitious huckster called Simei who starts a fictitious newspaper called *Domani* (“tomorrow”) that threatens to tell the truth about everything. The idea is to make the corrupt elites so nervous that they offer to buy Simei off or invite him into their inner circle. He proceeds to create a series of “zero” issues comprising amazingly prescient speculations, which he accomplishes by back-dating issues to create the appearance of having had access to insider knowledge. So “Tomorrow” gives readers yesterday’s news today, on the pretext that it was tomorrow’s news yesterday. Its comical parody-paranoia eventually focuses on the issue of whether Mussolini’s corpse was actually a body double. At first the theory seems to be typical of the constant unsupported speculations indulged in by a character named Braggadocio. But then a body is found, the fraudulent paper is shut down, and the line between

what we are asked to consider plausible and implausible becomes much harder to discern.

*Numero Zero* makes frequent overt references to Operation Gladio, e.g., the Peteano and Piazza Fontana bombings and the confluence of corrupt financiers (Licio Gelli) and secret services (General Miceli) within the Gladio-implicated P2 Masonic lodge. Eco mixes historical truths with speculation, as does Chambers, but favours an absurdist tone over the plausible, for a blackly humorous and somewhat dreamlike effect.

*Numero Zero* shares these traits with *Bleeding Edge* (2014), Thomas Pynchon's "9/11 novel". More or less realist but at times evocative of dreams, *Bleeding Edge* is very much a paranoid conspiracy detective novel, albeit more focused on 9/11-related conspiracy than on Gladio generally. Pynchon name-checks a variety of conspiracy connoisseur favourites with roots, at least, in verifiable reality – security-compromising PROMIS software (Anthes 1991), 9/11 insider trading (Potesman 2006), government agents masquerading as jihadi (The Independent 2005) – mixed with forays into a more hysterically (or sarcastically) paranoid world in which all the Arab taxi drivers in New York had foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks.

As with *Numero Zero*, it is difficult to say whether the paranoia here is genuine or parodic or simultaneously both, which I count as a strength of both novels. They raise more questions than they answer, suggesting a seamless fabric of the true and the false to unsettling effect upon the reader's sense of certainty. Both novels turn on the implicit conflict between trusting reality too much and not trusting it enough.

Maxi, earnest Maxi, forensic as always. These urban myths can be attractors, they pick up little fragments of strangeness from

everywhere, after a while nobody can look at the whole thing and believe it all, it's too unstructured. But somehow we'll still cherry-pick for the intriguing pieces, God forbid we should be taken in of course, we're too hip for that and yet there's no final proof that some of it *isn't* true. Pros and cons, and it all degenerates into arguments on the Internet, flaming, trolling, threads that only lead deeper into the labyrinth. (Pynchon 2014, p. 197)

Here Pynchon states overtly the aforementioned problem of infinite argument in a postmodern, post-truth environment in which facts, for good reasons as well as bad, are considered to be inherently suspect and effectively subservient to beliefs and values: Evidence is always dubious, those with other views are always trolls, discussions always end in flames, only the labyrinth beckons.

*Single Cabbage's* attempt to employ paranoia in a surrealist mode invokes the real of Gladio and 9/11 only obliquely. Unlike the novels just discussed, there are no specific references to historical events or anomalies in terrorism narratives, apart from the inclusion of President Kennedy and the mystery of his missing brain, which in any case departs radically in *Single Cabbage* from the actual circumstances. While inhaling these stories in all their details, I exhale them only as a mist. The idea is to follow the logic away from facts and from the realist approach so well represented by Chambers and Edmonds, along the absurdist-paranoid lines suggested by Eco and Pynchon, and more deeply into the dreamlike surreality that sees arguments and counter-arguments receding along with all certainty.

The questions raised in *Single Cabbage* – Is Arbop mad? Is he imagining that he is the subject of his own investigation? Are there terrorists or aren't there? Is the state engaged in a propaganda exercise of immense proportions to justify a society of control? – are not meant to have answers. The idea is to use paranoia as a tool to make uncomfortable questions unavoidable, to inspire both the act of

questioning and a tolerance for the unresolved, and to entertain “the possibility of a real, built by the rational, anchored by the delusional” (Hunt 1999).

Such considerations substantially comprise the rationale for *Single Cabbage*’s disorienting strategy – an alternative “strategy of tension” conceived as a sort of literary counterpoint to the one employed by Operation Gladio. We know enough to wonder more about why we think we know what we think we know.





## Conclusion

I have argued that *The Science of a Single Cabbage* is a novel that can be read in several ways, i.e., that it does not need to be read as a terrorism novel, certainly not as a delivery vehicle for a political message, and indeed that I hope it succeeds in the first instance as an amusing story of a man in a pickle. Nevertheless, in reflecting upon my writing style and artistic aims, I have chosen to grab the novel by the terrorism handle in order to highlight my characterization of the work as reflecting a surrealist mode of literature. I argue that approaching the terrorism novel in a surrealist mode in order to make an aesthetic of uncertainty and to disturb terrorism discourse is a timely and appropriate response to the ideologically overdetermined conceptual framework of the national security ontology.

Using the term “surrealist mode” rather than simply “surrealist” implies an affinity with the surviving spirit of an artistic philosophy that transcends its specific incarnation as an historical movement. This strategy of using surrealism as a reference point to an evolvable set of ideas rather than a movement rests on citations of artists and thinkers, including “renegade” surrealists like George Bataille, who believe in a larger, living, unfinished surrealism, and on my identification of five signature elements of surrealism that are shared by my project:

1. *Dreams and the unconscious*, as a rubric inclusive of a variety of methods of acknowledging the porousness of the border between the real and the imaginary or between fact and fiction;
2. *Black humour*, indicating a playful and mischievous compulsion to address (and transgress) societal taboos;
3. *Crime*, in particular spectacular crime, a notion that extends easily from the front-page violence that shocked 1930s Paris to the terrorist

crimes of today, particularly given surrealist notions of shooting randomly into crowds;

4. *Anti-fascism*, updated as anti-Ur-Fascism to be inclusive of opposition to the authoritarian tendencies, total surveillance, and loss of civil liberties in the modern national security state; and
5. *Paranoia*, used as a tool to explore the relationship between the subjective and objective, to query the narratives that compete for legitimacy within our conceptual frameworks, and to foreground the difficulties of telling sane from insane or rational from irrational.

I note that these five elements can variously be employed as technique, subject matter, or ethos, and that the list is not intended to be comprehensive or obligatory. They are simply five important facets of surrealism, as illustrated by historical references, that are also important to my novel. More generally, I suggest that there might be such a thing as a spectrum, ranging from weak to strong surrealist mode, depending on both the number of elements invoked and the intensity of their application. The prominent presence of all five elements in *Single Cabbage* justifies, or so I argue, the characterization of the work as literature in a surrealist mode.

The value of applying a surrealist mode to the terrorism novel at the present historical moment, upon which rests my claim to an original contribution to literature, derives from that mode's particular suitability for destabilising terrorism narratives by interrogating our ability to evaluate their reliability against a backdrop of thoroughly mediated and often-unverifiable imagery, propaganda, and spectacle. If the counterterrorist national security state is the defining characteristic of the post 9/11 world, and "with us or against us" its ultra-certain binary calling card, then

radical uncertainty is the taboo toward which the subversive instincts of a surrealist mode are drawn. The signature elements work together, amplifying each other's effects, the paranoia attacking the two-headed beast of terrorism and authoritarianism on a playfully oneiric stage.

Writers like Pynchon, Eco, DeLillo, and Lethem have brought a playful paranoia to the modern terrorism novel, as writers like Robert Coates, G.K. Chesterton, and Joseph Conrad did in an earlier generation. My approach builds on similar impulses to help carve out a literary space for an overtly surrealist mode within a political environment that, I believe, demands a strongly reality-contesting response. My work implicitly hopes that there is something to be gained by provoking laughter while disturbing assumptions, in order to render reality less solid by querying the givens of the big Other.

As I began this commentary with a New York story, it seems appropriate to note by way of conclusion that I returned to the city to complete the writing of *Single Cabbage*. Having written the first few drafts of the novel and the entire commentary in Newcastle upon Tyne, my head swimming with themes and theoretical notions, I felt the need to return to New York alone for a concentrated writing retreat, in order to recapture some of the original motivating feeling, breathe the city's air, feel its rhythms, ride its subways, absorb its energy, and thereby push through to a final, quite substantial revision.

The city in the novel is not New York, nor any real city, but a blend of cities. Yet the effect of time spent not only writing but wandering in Queens and Manhattan on the shape and content of the novel was remarkable, in ways both direct and indirect. Most of the stories of Arbop's subway rides are more or less transcriptions of lived experience. Arbop's security responsibilities transformed

from relying on headquarters-based quasi-militarism to becoming a professional flâneur, finely attuned to neighbourhoods and disturbances. Along with that change, several too-overt allusions to identifiable real events were removed or poeticised, as were any passages that struck me as remotely polemical. I think the overall result is a more human and engaging story, and one that is more finely calibrated to the strengths of a surrealist mode, working whatever magic it may possess not on a reader's reason, but on aesthetic and unconscious impulses. That, I think, is the appropriate tactic for would-be subversive art in a surrealist mode in a "post-truth" (Sismondo 2017), "post-fact" (Loseke 2017) society.

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